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# **Climate- and Environmentally Based Information Activities by PRC and Russian Media**

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# Introduction

Russia and China have effectively contributed to shifting the debate on climate change into the realm of morals, rights and economic policies, rather than scientific reality. For them, climate change is not only a matter of the factual impact of carbon emissions on weather patterns, as argued by O'Connor and Weatherall<sup>1</sup>, but also a question of morality or values. It is not only a scientific reality, but also a socially and politically constructed concept.<sup>2</sup> Over the years, China and Russia have consistently shifted and adapted their climate change narratives, reflecting the political nature of the issue. China has undergone a notable transformation, shifting “from a passive participant to a proactive actor” in the global climate arena.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Russia has demonstrated a range of positions on the issue, from denial to acceptance to operationalisation of climate change.

Russia and China resist being labelled as climate laggards and instead actively promote their contributions to global climate efforts. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China emphasises its proactive role in fostering a green economic transition and strengthening climate action. Xi often positions China as a climate leader, claiming that the country has “actively advanced the green transition of our economy, and raised the ambition of our climate actions on our own initiative.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Russian officials, including Vladimir Putin, have highlighted their country’s efforts to mitigate climate change. At the 2015 COP conference in Paris, Putin famously claimed that Russia’s economic policies “have slowed global warming by almost a year.”<sup>5</sup> Despite internal divisions over the impacts and implications of climate change, this statement underscores Russia’s desire to be seen as a responsible actor in the climate domain.

In spite of public assertions of climate leadership, both nations face scrutiny over their commitment to fighting climate change. The Climate Action Tracker, a scientific project run by Climate Analytics and NewClimate Institute non-profits, rates Russia’s climate policies as

“critically insufficient”<sup>6</sup>, which is the lowest rating of 5, and China’s as “highly insufficient”<sup>7</sup>, which is the second lowest rating.

Conversely, there is a shared suspicion of a Western agenda driving the global climate change discourse. Russia explicitly expressed this in its Declaration as a party to the Paris Agreement, stating that it “considers unacceptable the use of the Agreement and its mechanisms as tools to create barriers to sustainable social and economic development of the Parties to the Convention.”<sup>8</sup> This perspective continues to shape Russian climate policy today. Russia’s Climate Doctrine emphasises “the prioritisation of national interest”<sup>9</sup> as a bedrock principle, reflecting the ongoing distrust of Western motives in the climate change conversation. This approach is a balancing act — an attempt to recognise the severe impact of climate change on Russian regions, especially the Arctic, while remaining wary of international pressures perceived as detrimental to economic development.

Chinese suspicion of the West has a different manifestation — Beijing supports the UN forums, but positions itself as a victim, not a perpetrator of human-driven climate change.<sup>10</sup> This strategic stance aims to shape global perceptions in its favour, casting China as a leader in addressing climate challenges rather than a contributor to the problem. Environmental protection has become a key component of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agenda. To amplify this message, China harnesses extensive media influence activities, including expanding state media, leveraging social media, and cultivating relationships with foreign media outlets. Despite these efforts, the operational yield of such tactics remains debatable.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, China continues to invest heavily in portraying itself as a responsible global leader in environmental protection and climate action.

The complex, contested, and existential nature of climate change has made it a prime

target for information influence by Russia and China. The existential implications of climate change, coupled with its intricate connections to global politics, economics, and social justice, creates fertile ground for narrative construction and information manipulation. By weaving climate change into narratives about economic inequality, colonialism, and the rules-based international order, Russia and China exploit the issue to their geopolitical advantage.

It is an oversimplification to assume that countries adversarial to the West automatically adopt an opposing stance on climate change. Chinese and Russian information influence campaigns do not necessarily embrace climate change denialism, they can also manifest a concern over climate change. For instance, a Russian operation aimed at inciting anti-NATO sentiment in the Baltic states masqueraded as an ecological initiative, highlighting the anthropogenic and climate-related threats to the Baltic Sea's ecosystem.<sup>12</sup> This demonstrates their ability to harness environmentalism for geopolitical aims.

Similarly, China frequently employs climate change rhetoric to advance its political agenda. For example, when the European Commission initiated an investigation into Chinese electric vehicle imports, China framed the action as counterproductive to global climate efforts.<sup>13</sup> This tactic positions China as a climate leader while casting the EU as an obstacle to climate progress. As demonstrated, both Russia and China seek to turn the tables, leveraging climate change concerns to enhance their international image while challenging Western policies.

**Methodologically**, this paper adopts Pamment's definition of "narratives" as:

"The sequencing, structuring, or organisation of signs, codes and events into a coherent order. This provides means of linking together events according to a desired endpoint, usually by filtering out or selectively structuring the components. This filtering and ordering of events can establish causality, meaning and closure, and signal the realisation of a goal, and is often of a transformational character."<sup>14</sup>

Narratives are central to human relations; they shape our world and constrain behaviour. Consequently, political actors strategically employ narratives to achieve their goals.<sup>15</sup>

Russia and China have leveraged the 21st-century media landscape, including but not limited to PRC and Russian state-affiliated media outlets, to expose the global public to their strategic narratives, whether it is fostering anti-NATO sentiment or portraying themselves as climate champions. To safeguard the international information space in NATO nations and beyond, it is crucial to research, map, compare, and expose the climate and environment-related narratives propagated by PRC and Russian media. By understanding how these narratives are constructed and disseminated, we can better counter their influence and foster a more informed public.

This report aims to:

1. identify Russian and Chinese climate narratives;
2. conduct an in-depth study of the circumstances, functions, effectiveness, and reasons for these narratives;
3. detect similarities and investigate potential coordination based on similar goals and objectives by both countries;<sup>16</sup>
4. develop suggestions for counteracting these strategies.

The report draws on a combination of qualitative research methods to gather comprehensive data on the climate narratives of Russia and the PRC. This includes analysing media reports, official government statements, academic papers, and expert opinions in Mandarin Chinese, Russian, and English. Arguably, establishing the efficiency of a particular narrative would require societal research – such as surveys and focus groups – to measure its prevalence and impact among target populations.<sup>17</sup> However, since this report does not include societal research, the efficiency is estimated based on the authors' previous experience.

# Background and Context

China and Russia position themselves in geopolitical opposition to the West, NATO, and particularly the United States. This stance has become more pronounced since Xi Jinping's rise to power in China in 2012/2013, and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which led to Western sanctions. However, strong anti-NATO and anti-Western sentiments date back to the late 1990s. In 1997, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin expressed support for "a new, comprehensive security concept," emphasising the need to "do away with the Cold War mentality and oppose bloc politics," specifically targeting NATO. They aimed to "promote the development of a multipolar world and the establishment of a new international order."<sup>18</sup>

Research has shown strategic convergence between Russia and China on geopolitical and international security matters. This convergence extends to information manipulation, driven by shared goals in Russian and Chinese influence operations, including promoting anti-US positions.<sup>19</sup> For instance, this is a discernible alignment in the overarching themes of Russian and Chinese narratives critiquing NATO enlargement in 2023/2024, although the extent of direct collaboration or mutual amplification of narratives remains "complex and not conclusively demonstrable."<sup>20</sup> Both actors blame the West for the deterioration of the global security environment and view the US-led international order as a hindrance to their national interests, often referred to as "legitimate security concerns."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, they employ various measures, including information influence activities, to counter this perceived threat. Climate and environmental narratives provide fertile ground for these efforts, offering opportunities to frame the West as irresponsible or hypocritical in its climate policies while positioning themselves as responsible global actors.

Narratives play a crucial role in shaping the international order, as political actors attempt to influence how we "understand the

international system, international relations, and policy."<sup>22</sup> Thus, climate narratives can serve not only to address climate change but also to position states as responsible members of the global community.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, climate and environmental narratives naturally emerge from international diplomacy, often centering around key events like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The climate debate offers an excellent platform for virtue signalling and self-promotion, in which the West, especially European states, are also implicated. Research indicates that when communicating about climate change with China and the US, European diplomats implicitly suggest that European nations do "not have to alter their behaviour, as they have already decoupled their economy from emissions and have achieved the necessary emissions reductions.[...] In these narratives, the host state merely needs to follow the example set by the European state."<sup>24</sup>

While the US is often on the receiving end of European criticism, it also employs virtue signalling in its climate change conversations with China. For instance, during the height of the 2020 US-China trade war, the US government published a China's Environmental Abuses Fact Sheet,<sup>25</sup> which garnered almost immediate response from Beijing in the form of a Fact Sheet on Environmental Damage by the US.<sup>26</sup>

China recently recognised that the climate domain was becoming a significant field of contention for its "discourse power,"<sup>27</sup> solidifying its perception that simple responses to the West would not suffice. Instead, China determined that proactively shaping and disseminating strategic narratives was necessary. With this realisation, China has transitioned through three phases of national climate narratives. From 2009 to 2011, China portrayed itself as a victim of ecological imperialism, arguing that this hampered its national interest and jeopardised people's livelihoods. From 2011 to

2015, there was a shift from a narrative of inability to one of capability, with Xi Jinping using his “community of shared future for mankind” concept to frame climate issues as a challenge faced by both developed and developing countries. During this period, China advocated for an upgraded climate regime that facilitated its pursuit for a larger global role. Since 2015, China has positioned itself as a climate leader, depicting itself as a ‘torchbearer’ in climate governance, especially capitalising on the US decision to withdraw from the Paris agreement.<sup>28</sup> This proactive stance is part of China’s broader strategy to enhance its discourse power and present itself as a responsible global actor in the fight against climate change, contrasting with what it portrays as Western hypocrisy and inconsistency.

Tynkkynen (2010) highlights the connection between media framing of climate change in Russian media and ideology, particularly the notion of Russia as a “Great Ecological Power”.<sup>29</sup> She notes that Russia’s international image was a crucial factor behind its decision to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. In her study of media coverage of global climate policy between 2000 and 2004 in five dominant Russian newspapers (including *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*), she found that these outlets employed a narrative of Russia as a Great Ecological State to localise global climate policies and risks.

This framing is consistent with the broader observation that Russia’s climate policies are “consistent in their inconsistency.” Despite adopting the narrative of an ecological leader, Russia’s climate policies are “consistent in their inconsistency”, Russia’s climate policy often harbors significant contradictions – by design. For instance, while Russia promotes itself as part of the solution to global climate challenges through its vast forest resources and decreasing greenhouse gas emissions (a result of the post-USSR industrial collapse), it simultaneously utilises the climate change debate to further its subversive information efforts abroad, utilising a broader information manipulation playbook that includes confusion and obfuscation. This includes spreading

confusion and obfuscation regarding climate science and policy, which aligns with a broader information manipulation playbook.

Russian newspapers frequently used metaphors of ecological donor and ecological leader within this mission frame exemplifies the inconsistencies in Russia’s approach. Shifting between climate skepticism and acceptance depending on content, it reveals a strategic ambiguity that allows Russia to navigate international pressures while maintaining a degree of flexibility in its climate policies. Despite its contradictions, this ambiguous approach consistently serves its broader geopolitical and informational objectives.

**Broadly, the objectives** pursued by Russia and its agents fall into three main categories:

1. Shape perceptions to advance specific foreign policy aims;
2. Shape perceptions to advance Russia’s broader worldview and interests;
3. Sow confusion and mistrust.<sup>30</sup>

In the climate and environmental domain, the goals according to each category are:

1. Continue international reliance on Russian fossil fuel exports<sup>31</sup>;
2. Present Russia as a responsible stakeholder amidst Western “neo-colonialism” and “conspiracies”<sup>32</sup>;
3. Undermine trust in the existing international order by sowing mistrust of transnational frameworks aimed at mitigating climate change.

The following section examines the climate and environment narratives of the PRC and Russia, and attempts to assess their targeted audiences and effectiveness.

# Climate Narratives of Russia and the PRC

It is important to note that not all climate narratives from China and Russia present challenges to the international information environment. In fact, many are consistent with UN guidelines and objectives. However, this report identifies several specific narratives designed to counter Western perspectives. These narratives leverage climate and environmental issues to advance interests rather than global cooperation.

In China, a tightly coordinated “discourse coalition,” composed of the government, the media, and the scientific community, collectively shapes and disseminates the country’s climate narrative.<sup>33</sup> Zhang and Orbie describe a cascade process, where China’s top leaders initiate the climate strategic narrative through consensus building at the central level. This narrative is then developed and legitimised by experts and amplified by state media through controlled discussions and reports.<sup>34</sup> Although this model does not fully include public perceptions, it effectively centralises policy and narrative dissemination.

Within China, public opinion on climate issues is varied.<sup>35</sup> However, non-governmental groups and communities with differing views on China’s climate goals have limited influence.<sup>36</sup> As noted by Li, Pattberg and Widerberg, while non-state actors do have some opportunities to participate in climate governance in China, those with closer ties to the government tend to have greater influence. However, these government-tied entities are of course unlikely to challenge official government positions.<sup>37</sup>

Russia also exhibits characteristics of a “discourse coalition.” In Russia, repressive legislation has dramatically subordinated civil society to the state,<sup>38</sup> leaving little space for independent media and the epistemic community. Thus, the government, media, and epistemic community work in a tightly controlled and coordinated manner to formulate and disseminate climate narratives. The public

debate, although lively, lacks the capacity to significantly affect decision-making.

Discourse coalitions effectively centralise the creation and dissemination of government narratives and can limit the availability of alternative viewpoints. These narratives are developed and amplified through three main stages:

1. The narratives are introduced through official statements at both national and multilateral levels (e.g. UN, BRICS), and are embedded in strategic documents. These initial declarations establish the key points of the narrative.
2. The narratives are then scrutinised and shaped in controlled publications. Epistemic communities, including think tanks and policy experts, refine narratives to ensure coherence and alignment with broader strategic objectives.
3. Once refined, the narratives are re-packaged into more engaging formats, often by incorporating elements such as doom, humour, or human interest stories to enhance their appeal. These repackaged narratives are then disseminated via Chinese and Russian state-affiliated media<sup>39</sup> targeting both domestic and international audiences.

The most important PRC media outlets engaged in official narrative dissemination and propaganda activities include:

1. *China’s official news agency Xinhua (Xinhua She; 新华社)*, including [www.news.cn](http://www.news.cn)
2. *People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao; 人民日报)* -- official newspaper of the CCP Central Committee, which carries the most authoritative commentary;

3. *China Central Television (CCTV; Zhongguo Zhongyang Dianshitai; 中国中央电视台)*
  4. *China Global Television Network (CGTN; Zhongguo Guoji Dianshitai; 中国国际电视台)*
  5. *China Radio International (CRI; Zhongguo Guoji Guangbo Diantai; 中国国际广播电台)*
  6. *Global Times journal (Huanqiu Shibao; 环球时报)*
  7. *Qiushi journal (Qiushi; 求是)*
  8. *Sina.com.cn (Xinlang Wang; 新浪网)*<sup>40</sup>
- *Kommersant (Коммерсантъ) daily*
  - *Izvestia – (Известия) daily*
  - *Rossiyskaya Gazeta (Российская газета) daily*
  - *Nezavisimaya Gazeta (Независимая газета) daily*
  - *Vedomosti – (Ведомости) daily*<sup>41</sup>

The most important Russian media outlets engaged in official narrative dissemination and propaganda activities include:

- *State-owned news agency TASS – (ТАСС)*
- *Interfax (Интерфакс) news agency*
- *Lenta.ru*
- *Rossiya 1 (Россия 1) national television network*
- *Channel One (Первый канал) national television network*
- *RT television channel*
- *Sputnik News*

Methodologically, the PRC media outlets were screened for combinations of keywords, including but not limited to: climate, climate change, China, global warming, Xi Jinping, government, and statements. This analysis focuses primarily on English-language outputs. Similarly, Russian media outlets were screened for combinations of keywords and their grammatical variations, including but not limited to: climate, climate change, Russia, global warming, Vladimir Putin, government, statements. While English outputs were prioritised, Russian-language outputs were also included, recognising that Russian is often used to influence foreign audiences, including diasporas and neighboring nations.

To ensure the relevance of the analyzed material, several overarching narratives were gathered from downstream media sources, tracing them back to the material produced by official and epistemic communities. Quoted examples of these narratives are provided for illustrative purposes. The narratives are typically intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

## China's Climate Narratives

China's global media narrative aims to project its climate actions and policies to shape international perceptions of its environmental commitments and leadership. To maximise influence over international audiences, the CCP tailors its propaganda to the specific interests

of target populations through an approach defined as “precise communication.” This strategy influences all of the CCP's propaganda output, from news distribution through third parties, to TV show production, to the online and social media activities of party-state

media and Chinese diplomats,<sup>42</sup> particularly concerning climate and environmentally based narratives.

Previous scholarship has identified three distinct generations of climate and environmental narratives produced by the PRC “discourse coalition”:

1. Victim of Ecological Imperialism (2009–2011): During this period, Chinese media often portrayed climate change as a Western hoax intended to undermine China’s economic rise.<sup>43</sup>

2. Shift from Inability to Capability (2011–2015): This phase marked a transition where China began to highlight its growing capability to address climate challenges, facilitating its pursuit of a more prominent global role.

3. Leader and ‘Torchbearer’ in Climate Governance (from 2015): Since 2015, China has positioned itself as a global leader in climate governance, especially capitalising on the US decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement.<sup>44</sup>

The narratives presented below mostly fall into the latter category from 2015. However, making a clean break from the previous discursive period is challenging, and narratives sometimes carry over a legacy of outdated talking points.

## China’s Leadership and Ambitious Goals

“Xi Jinping is an early climate visionary.” Within the CCP vision of “our global future” and “Ecological Civilisation,”<sup>45</sup> Xi Jinping is portrayed as a pioneer who has championed a new paradigm of governance and development that emphasises environmental governance, restoration, and sustainable development.<sup>46</sup> This approach is consistently highlighted in political reports from the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th National Congress of the CCP, demonstrating the party’s intent to lead in social-environmental development and governance.

- a) The concept of “ecological civilisation”<sup>47</sup> reflects China’s ambition to be a global leader in environmental restoration, aligning with the broader Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.<sup>48</sup> Xi Jinping’s early recognition of ecological challenges, even before becoming Secretary General of the CCP, underscores his long-standing commitment to this vision.

For domestic audiences, this narrative is an axiom of “Xi Jinping Thought,” the Chinese president’s political ideology, now enshrined in the CCP’s constitution.

It reinforces the trend of state-sponsored nationalism observed over the past decade, rallying fervent patriotic sentiment and fostering belief in China’s technological and ecological progress as part of its national rejuvenation.

For international audiences, the narrative is designed to showcase Xi Jinping’s leadership and China’s progressiveness. Through slogans such as “Xiplomacy: Xi’s vision on the governance of global biodiversity,”<sup>49</sup> the narrative aims to position China as a global leader in ecological governance. However, this messaging has had limited impact internationally, as it is often obscured by formal language often used in official communications.

Example: “In 2005, Xi, then secretary of the Zhejiang Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China, visited Yucun. He assured the villagers that their move to close those factories was ‘wise.’

‘Mountains and rivers green are mountains of silver and gold,’ he said at the village’s simple and humble meeting room... The ‘two mountains’ concept, later developed into Xi’s thought on ecological civilisation, has encouraged numerous Chinese cities and villages to pursue high-quality and sustainable growth through protecting the environment and developing green industries.

*When Xi returned to Yucun 15 years later during an inspection tour in Zhejiang in March 2020, the village had transformed into a place featuring buildings with traditional white walls and black tiles, colourful flower fields and exquisite lotus ponds. The villagers made much more money than in the past thanks to a tourism boom. “The path of green development is correct, Xi said.”<sup>50</sup>*

- b) **“China has curbed the momentum of ecological and environmental deterioration.”** This narrative, frequently seen in state media and government reports, highlights China’s achievements in promoting “ecological civilisation.” For domestic audiences, it is designed to strengthen public trust in national policies and elicit pride from reported international praise. This narrative often appears around key events, such as the United Nations COP28 climate change conference, and aligns with the narrative of Xi Jinping as an “early climate visionary.”

For international audiences, particularly in the Global South, this narrative aims to demonstrate the efficiency of PRC policies and the Chinese people’s commitment to global environmental stewardship. It seeks to convince these audiences of China’s effective environmental strategies, positioning China as a model for sustainable development. According to the Atlantic Council, China views the Global South as a critical medium for enhancing its influence over international discourse.<sup>51</sup>

To spread narratives approved by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China has employed several strategies. Two key components of this approach are “leveraging international allies for global propaganda” (通过国际友人开展国际传播) and “riding on borrowed vessels” (借船出海). The first strategy involves enlisting the voices of foreigners, including foreign leaders, to promote pro-China messaging. The second strategy involves utilising international platforms to disseminate Chinese propaganda in targeted regions. This includes expanding China’s media presence, conducting targeted propaganda campaigns, and using Beijing’s sway to secure government backing for its initiatives in global institutions like the United Nations.

This narrative is assessed to have the potential to resonate with countries in the Global South that are receptive to alternative development models.

The narrative acknowledges the ongoing challenges of climate change and the persistence of some structural issues. However, it balances these challenges by highlighting numerous success stories from China, underscoring that while challenges remain, significant progress has been made under CCP leadership.

China’s storytelling is rich with both textual and visual elements, portraying a clean environment through prose, poetry, and imagery of urban settings.<sup>52</sup> This approach signals that ecological preservation and development are not mutually exclusive. Additionally, the narrative leverages national nature symbols, such as the Yangtze River and Huangshan, to evoke a sense of cultural pride and continuity.

*Example: “The achievements of ecological civilisation construction in the new era have attracted worldwide attention, and have become a notable symbol of the historic achievements and changes in the Party and the country’s*

*undertakings... In the face of the grim situation of the ecological environment, we have resolutely investigated and dealt with a number of major and typical cases of ecological damage, resolved a number of prominent ecological and environmental problems that have been strongly reflected by the people, and concentrated our efforts on the defence of the blue sky, blue water and clean soil, thus effectively curbing the momentum of ecological and environmental deterioration. .. coordinated the integrated protection and systematic management of mountains, water, forests, fields, lakes, grasses and sands, improved the legal and institutional system for ecological and environmental protection, deepened the reform of the ecological civilisation system, and significantly improved the level of ecological and environmental governance.”<sup>53</sup>*

- c) **“China has taken initiative to set ambitious carbon neutrality goals.”** The narrative prominently features China’s “dual carbon” objectives. Announced by Xi Jinping at the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2020, these goals aim for China to hit its peak carbon emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060.<sup>54</sup> China frequently emphasises its commitment to cutting carbon emissions “by the biggest margin in the world in the shortest time frame in history.”<sup>55</sup>

This narrative is primarily designed for an audience in both the West and the Global South, aiming to position China as global climate leader, countering perceptions of it as a primary polluter.<sup>56</sup> While various Chinese government agencies promote the carbon neutrality narrative, their specific focus varies based on their jurisdiction and administrative responsibilities. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasises a global frame, while the National

Development Reform Commission concentrates on political and economic aspects.<sup>57</sup>

While the narrative of ambitious carbon neutrality goals may struggle to gain full credibility due to China’s ongoing pollution issues, the narrative is strengthened when combined with the success story of the previous narrative, that “China has curbed the momentum of ecological and environmental deterioration.” This approach could resonate particularly well in developing countries who may be more receptive to China’s proposed models of development and environmental management.

*Example: Phoenix TV: “US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan referred to China as a significant outlier on climate action and said the US will continue pressing on that. How do you respond to this?”*

*Wang Wenbin: “President Xi Jinping said at the 16th G20 Leaders’ Summit that China has all along undertaken due international responsibilities commensurate with its national conditions. We have actively advanced the green transition of our economy and raised the ambition of our climate actions on our own initiative. We will honour our words and strive to peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060.”<sup>58</sup>*

- d) **“Our citizens are guardians of the planet.”** Focusing on human-interest narratives, China showcases how individuals in China are driving climate action. By spotlighting ordinary people, such as an illiterate Chinese man who turned desert into forest, the narrative humanises environmental issues.<sup>59</sup> Another example of this narrative is the coverage of the “Elephants Move North” story, which captivated domestic and international audiences.<sup>60</sup>

Domestically, this narrative encourages responsible climate action by emphasising a collectivist ethos in line with the nation's founding values and Xi Jinping's vision.<sup>61</sup> By portraying climate action as a shared goal, it aims to inspire a sense of national pride and collective responsibility. Internationally, this narrative signals the virtue of the Chinese people, portraying them as providers of public good, emphasising Xi Jinping's concept of "community of a shared future of mankind," signifying a push towards a multipolar climate governance structure. Human-interest stories are effective as they personalise the crisis and inspire change.<sup>62</sup> This narrative has the potential to resonate strongly with foreign news audiences, who respond more to crisis, drama, and human interest than to national policies.<sup>63</sup>

However, the carefully curated nature of such stories by PRC media can limit their authenticity and impact. For example, climate activists are often depicted as working within the framework of state initiatives with state support, rather than challenging existing policies or practices, as seen below:

*Example: "Shi Guangyin, 69, born in Shaanxi Province, is a pioneer in China's desert control efforts. He has led the way in greening north China by planting tens of millions of different trees and bushes over the past 37 years. Shi believes that sand control efforts must be combined with efforts to protect clear waters and lush mountains. [...] Shi is illiterate. 'It would be in vain to fight desertification without knowledge. We need continuous efforts, generation after generation, to protect the environment,' he said. So he donated money to build two elementary schools that can accommodate 280 pupils.*

*In addition to afforestation, Shi's company expanded to other industries such as livestock breeding and potato cultivation to help local people rise out of poverty. On June 29, Shi received the July 1 Medal, the Communist Party of China's highest honour to a member."<sup>64</sup>*

## Global Responsibility and Geopolitical Challenges

e) **"Others, not China, are responsible for global climate change and extreme weather."** China often attributes the primary responsibility for global climate change and extreme weather to developed countries, citing historic injustices and insufficient financial and technical transfer to developing nations. Despite being a major carbon emitter, China frequently deflects attention from its own role. Instead, state media positions China as a global climate leader urging developed countries to take greater responsibility.<sup>65, 66</sup>

China's special climate envoy, Xie Zhenhua, articulated this stance at UN climate negotiations, stating: "[We need to] see if developed countries have honoured their commitments. Still some countries have not started their mitigation efforts or provided financial support [to poor nations]. We strongly urge them to pay up on their debts."<sup>67</sup> This approach deflects responsibility from China and minimise its environmental impact, echoing the earlier "victim of ecological imperialism" narrative.

This message resonates in the Global South by tapping into long standing grievances against the West. For instance, officials from the Solomon Islands have expressed disappointment with US climate leadership while recognizing China's growing role. In an NPR interview, they stated: "The show of lack of leadership by the current US government in the fight against climate change is very discouraging not only to us but to all the low-lying island nations of the Pacific. Although China is one of the biggest CO2 emitters, it is showing leadership and commitment to help lead our global efforts against [climate change]."<sup>68</sup> This narrative has the potential to be effective in the Global South, where China's investments in climate finance are substantial. Despite under-delivering on its promise for a South-South Climate Cooperation Fund, China's position as the largest economy in the developing world adds to its credibility as the de facto leader of the developing country bloc in international climate negotiations.<sup>69</sup>

*Example: "Developed countries, which bear historical responsibility for global climate change, should take the lead in drastically reducing emissions and expeditiously filling the \$100 billion annual commitment gap in climate financing. A study published in June this year in the British journal Nature Sustainability shows that about 90 per cent of the world's excessive carbon emissions originate from developed countries such as the United States, which should pay compensation to low-carbon emitting countries, thus ensuring that targets related to combating climate change can be achieved."<sup>70</sup>*

f) **"US geopolitical games and unilateralism is hindering climate change mitigation."** China frames US "unilateralism and geopolitical games"<sup>71</sup> as an obstacle to climate progress. The democratic regression in the US in the late 2010s and early 2020s, coupled with a lack of clear global American leadership, provided China with an opportunity to position itself as a responsible global leader.

Notably, following the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and then-President Trump's anti-environmental stance, China portrayed itself as a stabilizing and leading force in the fight against climate change.<sup>72</sup> In a September 2020 virtual address to the United Nations, Xi claimed: "Humankind can no longer afford to ignore the repeated warnings of nature and go down the beaten path of extracting resources without investing in conservation, pursuing development at the expense of protection, and exploiting resources without restoration."<sup>73</sup> As one activist from Greenpeace noted, "Xi Jinping's climate pledge is a bold diplomatic move that demonstrates clear political will and the maximum desire to contrast China's climate stance with the US."<sup>74</sup>

China's messaging targets Spanish-speaking audiences in the Global South, among others. For instance, China Radio International's Spanish report echoed CGTN's narrative, criticising US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo over her comments on information security risks related to PRC-produced EVs: "Is she ignorant of how international trade works or is she simply playing dumb by making these sensationalist statements using fiction?"<sup>75</sup> This rhetoric is coupled with the enduring "victim of ecological imperialism" narrative, where China urges developed countries to "achieve carbon neutrality ahead of schedule... and take concrete actions to rebuild North-South mutual trust."<sup>76</sup>

This narrative is highly effective and likely to be widely reproduced. It is grounded in reality, enhancing its credibility, and resonates with many nations in the Global South.<sup>77</sup> For example, CarbonBrief, a UK-based website covering the latest developments in climate science, climate policy and energy policy funded by the European Climate Foundation, reported that 164 out of 193 governments reacted negatively to the US, albeit temporary, withdrawal from the Paris agreement in 2017 during the Trump presidency. This illustrates a widespread global disapproval of US actions and aligns with China's portrayal of itself as a responsible global leader in climate change mitigation.<sup>78</sup>

*Example: "As some parts of the world are still enduring extreme heat waves, Chinese scientists warned that US politicisation, flip-flopping on the climate change issue and lack of sincerity fully exposes the US' hypocrisy on climate issues, and risks pushing the already burning planet to a warmer and more catastrophic future. On the contrary, China is sticking to its goal to have CO2 emissions peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060, and the current heat wave and drought in this country will not scupper those goals, said scientists."*<sup>79</sup>

- g) **"China and other nations should jointly address climate change despite geopolitical tensions."** In a rare positive framing of China-Western relations, China's English-language media emphasises the theme of "other nations as China's allies" in the fight against climate change.<sup>80</sup> This framing is often reinforced through references to joint statements with Western leaders, such as those between French President Emmanuel Macron and Xi Jinping,<sup>81</sup> and by citing Western experts who advocate for US-China cooperation on climate.

However, this narrative is strategically designed to serve China's interests. China uses environmental causes to extract concessions from the US and other Western countries, dangling the prospect of cooperation on climate issues in exchange for geopolitical accommodations.<sup>82</sup> For example, while China has "pledged" to reduce emissions, it continues to construct new coal plants "to fuel its ongoing industrial expansion and military modernisation."<sup>83</sup> As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi indicated to then Presidential Envoy Kerry, "cooperation on reducing emissions cannot be separated from the broader relationship,"<sup>84</sup> suggesting that China may use climate issues as a bargaining chip.

This narrative could be particularly effective in the West, because it aligns with prevailing Western media coverage that portrays climate change as a potential area of cooperation between East and West. Furthermore, the narrative's inclusion of criticism towards the US federal government while praising sub-national climate initiatives taps into existing domestic frustrations and positions China as a potential partner for progressive action.

*Example: "As the world's two largest emitters of greenhouse gases, the United States and China need to build trust to address climate change and its impact on public health despite geopolitical tensions, experts said. Highlighting the importance of partnerships and collaboration, Deborah Seligsohn, a professor in the Political Science Department at Villanova University, said both nations have enormous healthcare and research capacities to deal with climate challenges."*

*"There's still technical questions where scientific cooperation is needed. We should come up with solutions that can help the rest of the world.'...*

*In October, California Governor Gavin Newsom joined the 'Great Wall Climate Dialogue' in Beijing along with his Chinese counterparts. They discussed ways to accelerate climate action at the subnational level. Seligsohn noted, however, that there still were people within the US government questioning the progressive approach, such as California's collaboration with China. Despite the internal debates, 'it's really important to endorse the most effective programs and get us back on track together.'*<sup>85</sup>

- h) **"The EU chooses market protectionism over climate goals."** This narrative criticises EU policies, such as the European Commission's anti-subsidy investigation into Chinese electric vehicle imports, which China portrays as hypocritical and counterproductive to "global efforts to address climate change and achieve carbon neutrality."<sup>86</sup> By highlighting the EU's alleged inconsistency between its self-proclaimed climate leadership and its protectionist policies, China aims to undermine its credibility, particularly in the Global South. Additionally, by emphasising economic consequences to European consumers, China seeks to generate domestic opposition to these policies. This messaging strategy is designed to erode the EU's credibility as a climate leader and create domestic pressure, with a hope of challenging the EU's policy decisions.

While the efficacy of this narrative remains uncertain, regional research indicates that European audiences are generally more receptive to China's economic narratives than to its value-based or geopolitical narratives.<sup>87</sup> This suggests that framing the EU's actions as economically self-serving and detrimental to climate goals might resonate well with these audiences. However, the narrative could fail to penetrate due to skepticism of China's motives, particularly given broader geopolitical tensions.

*Example: "Experts said that it is wiser for the EU to work with China on the issue so that the two trade partners can tap their strong economic complementarities, noting that Chinese NEVs are a contributing, not an undermining, factor for the EU's climate goals. The EU's probe into Chinese NEVs is not conducive to deepening cooperation in the new-energy industries of both parties and it will also affect the interests of EU consumers... backpedaling on the path toward a green, low-carbon future, such as using combustion engine cars with environmentally friendly fuels, is not in the best interests of the EU."*<sup>88</sup>

## China's Contribution to Global Efforts

- i) **"China's economic initiatives are helping the world mitigate climate change."** China has increasingly positioned its economic initiatives as significant contributions to global climate change mitigation, despite ongoing criticism of China's export of environmentally unfriendly technologies, such as coal-powered plants, via its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This narrative aligns with Xi Jinping's

emphasis on "win-win cooperation and high-quality development," which aims to position China as a climate leader.

Over the past decade, China has prioritised growth of its green energy sector, including solar panels, lithium-ion batteries, and new energy vehicles.<sup>89</sup> China's leadership views climate change as a national security issue, and has as

a result “given science, technology, and innovation near absolute priority”.<sup>90</sup> This commitment has strengthened their grip on the solar industry, now controlling 80 percent of the solar supply chains.<sup>91</sup>

However, critics argue that the push for increased energy efficiency and use of non-fossil fuels does not necessarily translate to real environmental gains, as the true solution would come from cutting overcapacity and not operating unnecessary plants.<sup>92</sup> Western observers remain skeptical of China’s climate claims, given the gap between their rhetoric and their actions.<sup>93</sup>

Nonetheless, this narrative could potentially be impactful when paired with the success story that “China has curbed the momentum of ecological and environmental deterioration.” This combined message could resonate with audiences in developing countries, where economic growth and environmental sustainability are critical concerns.

*Example: “The BRI embraces the global trend of green and low-carbon development, emphasises respecting and protecting nature and following its laws, and respects the right of all parties to pursue sustainable and eco-friendly growth... Through closer cooperation in areas such as green infrastructure, renewable energy, eco-friendly transport, and sustainable finance, all parties work together to broaden consensus and take concrete steps towards green development. The ultimate goal is to establish a resource-efficient, eco-conscious and low-carbon Silk Road, thereby making a significant contribution to protecting the eco-environment, achieving peak carbon and neutrality goals and addressing climate change. Leveraging its expertise in renewable energy, energy conservation, environmental protection and clean production, and employing Chinese technology, products and experience, China actively promotes BRI cooperation in green development.”<sup>94</sup>*

j) **“China has made strides to defend its people against food security challenges posed by climate change.”** This narrative emphasises that China has made significant progress in addressing food security challenges caused by climate change through scientific and technological advancements in agriculture, including genetic modification techniques to enhance crop productivity.<sup>95</sup>

Since coming to power, Xi Jinping has prioritised addressing food security, particularly in the face of escalating climate challenges. Extreme weather events, water scarcity, and environmental degradation pose threats to agricultural production and the nation’s food supply.<sup>96</sup> Because China produces 28% of the global rice supply,<sup>97</sup> the Chinese leadership is acutely aware of its vulnerability to popular unrest due to climate change,<sup>98</sup> and more incentivised to bolster agriculture resilience.

This narrative emphasises that China is taking proactive measures to safeguard its food security. Themes like “Our citizens are guardians of the planet”<sup>99</sup> and “China has curbed the momentum of ecological and environmental deterioration” reinforce the message that China is committed to environmental stewardship and sustainability. This narrative not only reassures domestic audiences of the government’s proactive stance, but also invites international collaboration by positioning China as a leader in food security and an innovator in climate solutions.

*Example: “China has boosted its biological breeding industry through scientific and technological methods, contributing greatly to the country’s steady supply of grain and other major agricultural products. In recent years, China has solidly pushed forward its seed industry revitalisation, and has achieved a number of breakthroughs. China has independently bred three new white-feather broiler chicken varieties, thereby ending*

*its previous complete dependence on imports. [...] The market share of these new varieties reached 25.1 percent in 2023 and they were exported abroad for the first time last year.”<sup>100</sup>*

## Russia’s Climate Narratives

Previous research has outlined the features of the contemporary model for Russian propaganda, which can be summarised as: High-volume and multichannel; Rapid, continuous, and repetitive; Lacks commitment to objective reality; Lacks commitment to consistency.<sup>101</sup> The Russian approach to climate and environment narratives fit the model, as the narratives are plentiful, are often inauthentically amplified, false, and contradictory.

### Climate Skepticism

- a) **“We do not understand global warming.”** Vladimir Putin’s messaging surrounding climate change is marked by inconsistency, ranging from denialism to skepticism to alternative explanations. This inconsistency creates a particularly dangerous narrative for global information environments. While Putin does not outright deny the existence of climate change, he questions scientists’ ability to establish its causes, thereby undermining public trust in scientific consensus.

The scholars Javeline, Orttung et al. have shown that even Russia’s Academy of Sciences, the institution providing scientific expertise to policy-making, claims on its official website that the “rumours of climate catastrophe are somewhat exaggerated.”<sup>102</sup> This statement reflects a climate skepticism within Russia’s scientific and policy-making institutions, which can dilute public confidence in climate science globally.

The researchers Ashe and Pobererzhskaya argue that such climate skepticism is extremely flexible, used not to combat environmental efforts directly but as a tempering element. This skepticism can be integrated into state narratives to decelerate climate change policy or to mitigate public anxiety about environmental issues.<sup>103</sup> By promoting uncertainty, this narrative plays into a broader motif often found in Russian disinformation and conspiracy theories, pushing the question: how can we really be sure about anything? This strategy can be particularly effective in undermining international efforts to combat climate change, as it sows confusion and divides public opinion.

*Example: “We are witnessing global warming, but we do not understand the reasons for this warming, because there are still no answers. And the so-called anthropogenic emissions, most likely, are not the main cause of this warming, it may be changes of a global nature.”<sup>104</sup>*

## Climate Denialism

- b) **“Global warming is not caused by human activity.”** In 2020, Leopold Lobkovsky, a researcher from the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, published a study funded by the Russian government suggesting that seismic activity, rather than human action, is primarily responsible for “abrupt climate warming phases in the Arctic.”<sup>105</sup> While the study acknowledged the role of anthropogenic factors, it emphasised the need to seriously reconsider the geological causes of climate change.<sup>106</sup>

Following the invasion of Ukraine and subsequent sanctions in 2023, Russian media outlets amplified this theory. For example, Russian media outlet Kommersant quoted Lobkovsky, stating: “Man is not to blame for global warming. Catastrophic earthquakes in the polar regions are the cause.”<sup>107</sup> This narrative is a spin off of the “We do not understand global warming” message and is a classic example of the Russian approach – it lacks commitment to objective reality and consistency, with the goal to confound, not persuade the audiences, both domestic and foreign. By casting doubt on the overwhelming scientific consensus, Russia aims to undermine collective global climate action.

This disinformation campaign not only misrepresents the scientific evidence but also serves broader geopolitical goals. By questioning the human role in climate change, Russia challenges the legitimacy of the rules-based order

by suggesting that international climate agreements are misguided or based on incomplete science. This aligns with the broader conspiratorial narrative that the “green economy” is a Western plot to curb Russia’s economic development.

*Example: “The cause of climate change may not be CO2 emissions so much as massive earthquakes. If this is the case, then the theory of global warming on which the climate protocols and agreements, the transition to green energy and the new economy are based needs to be critically rethought...”*

*Leopold Lobkovsky: “I emphasise that we are not alone. Yes, proponents of global warming have managed to convince the world community and many governments that the cause of climate change is anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide. If we do not reduce them, the consequences would be catastrophic – flooding of megacities, droughts, crop failures, famine, epidemics, etc. The only way out is the ‘green economy,’ emission quotas and further down the list. In fact, this is the transition of mankind to a new world order, where a few countries will set their own rules of the game, referring to the climate. But I assure you, there is no consensus in the scientific community about the causes of warming. There are doubts about the causes of climate change. And there are more and more of these voices.”<sup>108</sup>*

## Western Countries are Destroying the Russian Economy

- c) **“Green economy’ is a Western plot to destroy the economies of underdeveloped countries.”** Russian media predominantly emphasise the prioritisation of economic development over environmental concerns.<sup>109</sup> They claim the “green economy” is a strategic maneuver by Western powers to stifle the economic growth of developing countries. They argue that climate activists, such as Greta Thunberg, are being utilised as propaganda tools to stymie Russia’s economic development.<sup>110</sup> This narrative has been expanded to present the entire non-Western world, rather than just Russia, as the victim.<sup>111</sup> The economic costs argument portrays international climate agreements as not adequately considering “Russia’s need to develop and grow economically.”<sup>112</sup> Russia is thus cast as the hero, while the West remains the villain, accused of neo-colonial and cynical motives. Some newspapers even resort to inflammatory language, using terms like “hostile West” and “evil capitalism”.<sup>113</sup>

In this view, environmental issues are dismissed as fabrications serving Western interests. The West is portrayed as attempting to enforce environmental restrictions that act as economic constraints, described as a “noose against competitors.”<sup>114</sup> Former leader of the Just Russia party, Sergei Mironov, has echoed these sentiments, referring to climate change as “the total fraud” and a “a trap for Russia” set by the West.<sup>115</sup> Mironov’s statements underscore the belief that the climate agenda is a deliberate ploy to weaken Russia’s economic potential and maintain Western dominance. In other words, this narrative argues the climate crisis is a Western invention aimed at preventing developing states from achieving industrialisation and economic autonomy.

Hirsch writes that Russian information campaigns are designed to promote this view, positioning Russia as a benevolent development partner, and a preferable alternative to Western influences.<sup>116</sup> This narrative suggests that while the West seeks to impose limiting environmental policies, Russia offers unrestricted support and cooperation.

*Example: “The Western world has deliberately inflated the negative impact of anthropogenic factors on the planet’s climate. In reality, this is not the case. The higher the percentage of a country’s GDP, the higher the percentage of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere. This makes clear the desire of developed countries, which are pushing the idea of global warming, to limit the industrial growth of developing economies.”<sup>117</sup>*

- d) **“Sanctions on Russia lead to a growing carbon footprint.”** While the US Treasury maintains that the sanctions against Russia are effective,<sup>118</sup> Russian sources, such as Rossiyskaya Gazeta, counter that Moscow has successfully adapted and resisted these sanctions. According to these Russian sources, although Western sanctions initially reduced Russian oil revenues, they ultimately proved ineffective as Russia adapted and mitigated their impact.

Crucially, this narrative claims US sanctions have had the effect of driving up demand for less environmentally friendly energy sources such as coal, effectively reversing climate progress. Rossiyskaya Gazeta, for instance, argues that “sanctions and international conflicts harm the environment more than coal and oil production.”<sup>119</sup> This claim was echoed by the Russian energy ministry who claimed that Russia’s “plans to reduce national

net emissions 80% between 1990 and 2050 would not now be achieved” due to Western sanctions.<sup>120</sup>

This stance indirectly acknowledges the human-driven nature of climate change and the potential benefits of a green economy, diverging from the previous narratives. The narrative appeals particularly to audiences already critical of Western sanctions and those feeling the negative economic effects in their own regions.

*Example: “The energy crisis in Europe has greatly dimmed the lustre of the green agenda. No, no one has given up on achieving climate goals, but sanctions and restrictions are pushing*

*the beautiful, clean future of our planet further away and negatively affecting the climate and the environment...*

*You can have several large international climate conferences, but they will not reduce the level of carbon and methane emissions into the atmosphere. But lengthening the journey time of oil tankers, trucks or aeroplanes by several times increases these emissions. Localised military conflicts add fuel to the fire. But even these are only child’s play compared to what sanctions have done, which have changed the entire global logistics of oil, gas and petroleum product supplies.”<sup>121</sup>*

## Climate Change Presents Opportunities

e) **“Arctic melt can benefit Russia economically.”** In 2017, during the International Arctic Forum “Arctic – the Territory of Dialogue” in Arkhangelsk, President Putin discussed the economic *opportunities* presented by Arctic melting. Acknowledging that the Arctic will continue to melt regardless of the Paris agreement, Putin emphasised the need for Russia to adapt to these changes and highlighted the economic benefit that could arise.<sup>122</sup> He pointed to new shipping routes, improved access to energy sources and minerals, and even the expansion of agricultural lands as potential advantages.<sup>123</sup>

This stance exemplifies a conflicting narrative in Russian discourse. While Russian media often highlights the perils of climate change for the Arctic, including environmental degradation and threats to indigenous communities and wildlife, there is also a growing narrative that views climate change as an opportunity for expedited economic growth.<sup>124</sup> This dual narrative suggests that despite

the environmental risks, Russia can leverage the changing Arctic landscape to boost its economy.

*Example: “Glacier shrinkage has its pros and its cons, scientists note. On the one hand, this process favours the expansion of the forest belt and the upward rise of the vegetation boundary. However, glacier melting changes the distribution of water in mountain rivers and erodes rocks, leading to large-scale mudflows and rockslides.”<sup>125</sup>*

f) **“Rising temperatures are increasing the crop yield in Siberia.”** Russia’s search for opportunities in climate change extends beyond the Arctic, with public narratives also focusing on Siberia. These narratives envision reshaping global agriculture and renegotiating Russia’s standing in the world order.<sup>126</sup> While media reports frequently discuss the negative effects of climate change in Siberia, a counter-narrative highlights potential benefits from rising temperatures. Supported by local research, this narrative suggests

that warmer climates could enhance agricultural yields in the region, making Siberia an agricultural hub.

This narrative has significant geopolitical implications. It positions Russia as a future agricultural powerhouse and suggests that as climate change impacts other regions negatively, Russia's ability to produce crops would become indispensable. This narrative therefore seeks to attract international support and investment.

*Example: "The temperature in January and its deviation from the norm make a strong positive contribution to the increase in yields and gross collection for all crops. [...] The softening of winters in Russia may become an important factor for the future development of agriculture, especially for the Urals, Volga and Siberian Federal Districts."<sup>127</sup>*

## Russia-China Joint Narrative

- a) **"Protecting the environment is a pretext for barriers to global trade."** Unlike the Russian "Green economy is a Western plot" narrative, this shared narrative does not engage in climate denialism. Instead, while both countries publicly endorse the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement,<sup>128</sup> they criticise Western nations for applying double standards, and imply Western environmental protections are an excuse to implement trade barriers.

Highlighting this perceived hypocrisy allows Russia and China to position themselves as defenders of developing nations and the Global South. They argue that while Western countries champion environmental protection, they simultaneously impose trade restrictions that hinder economic growth in the Global South. This stance allows them to cultivate an image of global leadership.

*Example: "The Parties emphasise that increased financial support by developed countries to developing countries is essential to strengthen measures to reduce global warming and address the issue of unequal access to finance. The Parties oppose the creation of barriers to international trade under the pretext of combating climate change and the use of climate issues for political purposes."<sup>129</sup>*

# Shaping the Climate Narrative: Strategic Aims

Understanding an actors' strategic aims is crucial in the study of strategic narratives and politics.<sup>130</sup> Given the deep implications of climate change, it is not surprising that Russia and China shape their climate narrative to align with their national strategic aims. While both countries acknowledge domestic environmental and climate change issues and implement policies to mitigate them, they also view climate change as an opportunity for information manipulation. Russia and China generally deploy climate narratives with two main goals: (1) to vilify the West and (2) to showcase their status at great powers.

## A Push to Vilify the West

The EUvsDisinfo project, run by the European External Action Service East Stratcom Task force, has mapped the most radical, conspiratorial form of Russian disinformation and identified a pattern of increasingly radical climate change disinformation propagated by pro-Kremlin media outlets. These outlets often frame climate change as a Western conspiracy designed to undermine Russia.

The DISARM Framework, hosted by the Disarm Foundation, outlines a strategy for achieving narrative dominance through the promotion of compelling narratives. Tactically, promotion techniques include leveraging existing narratives, developing competing narratives, leveraging conspiracy theory narratives, amplifying existing conspiracy theory narratives, developing conspiracy theory narratives, demanding insurmountable proof, responding to breaking news event or active crisis, developing new narratives, and integrating target audience vulnerabilities into narratives.<sup>131</sup> An influence operation might amplify an existing conspiracy theory that aligns with its incident or campaign goals or develop original conspiracy

theory narratives to achieve greater control and alignment over the narrative and their campaign goals.<sup>132</sup>

Russia employs a full spectrum of these tactics, from diplomatic rhetoric to blatant disinformation. For instance, ahead of a recent UN Climate Change Conference, Dmitry Biriachevsky, head of the Economic Cooperation Department of the Russian Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, suggested that Western sanctions were cloaked as climate action. This narrative was amplified by more extreme claims, such as a Russian lawmaker's allegation that "the United States may be using a 'climate weapon' to cause an unseasonably warm winter in Russia."<sup>133</sup>

The psychological effect on the reader is significant: while the more radical conspiracy may be dismissed as less credible, it primes the audience to accept a more moderate, yet still harmful, portrayal of the West using climate change to target Russia. This psychological manipulation bolsters the underlying narrative of Western aggression against Russia.

China has adopted a similar strategy, accusing the West of hypocrisy on the climate change issue. China has argued that American and European industrial policies, including tariffs on Chinese-produced electric vehicles, are a sign of Western hypocrisy. This narrative posits that “in order to undermine China, the US has allied with European countries, using tariffs and other means to artificially cut off the already established advanced green industrial chain. [...] This is the most significant blow to global climate change efforts to date.”<sup>134</sup> By framing a trade and security issue within the context of climate mitigation, China positions the West as the perpetrator, accusing it of undermining global climate efforts for geopolitical gain.

## A Platform to Showcase Great Power Status

Despite supporting UN forums on climate change, China and Russia both strive to showcase their influence over this issue.

In China’s case, they often promote narratives highlighting their leadership, such as “China’s economic initiatives are helping the world mitigate climate change” and “Our citizens are guardians of the planet.” At the opening ceremony of the Paris climate summit in 2015 and during subsequent climate conferences, Xi Jinping consistently framed international climate institutions within the PRC’s vision of a “community of a shared future of mankind.”<sup>135</sup> These narratives aim to highlight China’s proactive role and leadership in global climate efforts, reinforcing its image as a responsible global power committed to climate action.

Russia’s strategy involves claiming primacy in climate discovery and innovation. For example, during a video meeting with President Putin, Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Aleksandr Kozlov boasted: “The weather is changing from one extreme to another because of global climate change. By the way, one of the first to make its forecast was Russian academic Mikhail Ivanovich Budyko back in the 1970s.”<sup>136</sup> This narrative reflects a common Russian trope of overemphasizing Russian achievements.

This Cold War mindset frames breakthroughs not as contributions to humanity but as victories over competing nations. By adopting and adapting climate and environment narratives, both China and Russia shape them along nationalist lines of self-achievement, aiming to bolster their image as great powers on the global stage.

# Russian and Chinese Approaches to International Climate Institutions

Various entities in China and Russia, including government agencies and international organisations, serve the goal of propagating “domesticated” narratives shaped along nationalist lines of self-achievement. Both actors aim to shape global climate policies and perceptions, but the strategies to achieve this goal differ significantly.

China’s approach is systemic, intertwining narratives with institutional influence in a positive feedback loop. Beijing maintains and pursues positions in influential global climate platforms to normalise Chinese political phrases like “a community with a shared future for mankind” and “ecological civilisation” within the international mainstream discourse. For example, China has held four co-chair positions in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), including the current co-chair Wang Xiaoye in Working Group I.<sup>137</sup> This strategy allows Beijing to influence existing international norms platforms.<sup>138</sup>

In contrast, Russia’s strategy is more disruptive. This approach has been exacerbated by Russia’s full scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and its resulting isolation. Russia often depicts Western-led international institutions as lacking legitimacy, hijacked by certain agenda groups (e.g., George Soros), and hypocritical. To this end, Russia employs disinformation to undermine trust in climate science, linking these issues to its broader anti-Western narrative.<sup>139</sup>

Despite these differences, China’s and Russia’s rhetoric converges when criticising the West. For instance, the 2024 Joint Statement by Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping on Deepening the Partnership of Comprehensive Strategic Collaboration in the New Era reaffirmed their commitment to the Paris Agreement while opposing linking climate change to security concerns.<sup>140</sup> By opposing “the linking of climate issues to threats to international peace and security on the grounds of combating climate change,”<sup>141</sup> China and Russia share an anti-Western backbone of their climate narratives.

# Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Russia and China have effectively shifted the debate on climate change into the realm of morals, rights and economic policies.

Previous research has shown that China and Russia are driven by the desire for great power status. In adopting and adapting climate and environment narratives, both Chinese and Russian media shape these narratives along nationalist lines of self-achievement, converging where it suits their interests. While their narratives share traits, significant differences also exist.

For both nations, the typical use of climate or environmental narratives are geopolitical. Within their broader argument for “multipolarity,” they aim to undermine the credibility of institutions and mechanisms associated with the Western-led rules-based international order. Both pursue this by promoting the story of hypocritical Western powers creating barriers to economic development under the pretext of combating climate change. This narrative often appears in official joint statements after high level bilateral meetings.

Beyond geopolitical considerations, economic factors are also significant for both countries. However, their concerns stem from different positions. For China, these narratives aim to present the nation as a leader in green technology and economic development, and leverage its advancements to gain global influence and market share. In contrast, Russia focuses on muddying the waters and buying time, as the country lacks viable green alternatives. A 2022 Bank of Russia Report admitted that measures to reduce carbon emissions and tighten environmental policies pose financial risks for Russian companies.<sup>142</sup> Russia’s strategy involves creating uncertainty and delaying international environmental commitments in order to protect its fossil fuel-based economy.

Interestingly, China is well aware of Russia’s economic vulnerabilities, as domestic pundits often describe the challenges Russia faces as “a traditional energy exporter”<sup>143</sup> with an undiversified export economy. This condescension, disguised as concern for Russia’s economic well-being, paints Russia as an environmental late-comer, enhancing the perception that China is comparatively progressive and well-managed. Although this narrative currently targets domestic audiences, it holds potential for use in regions where China and Russia compete economically or culturally, such as Central Asia. Chinese analysts note that sanctions following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine may push Russia’s climate policy forward.<sup>144</sup> Chinese analysts do not expect Russia to maintain its climate denialist stance for long; by invading Ukraine, Russia has dramatically shortened its transition horizon.

China does not prioritise alternative explanations of climate change, accepting human activity as the primary cause. In this, however, the PRC communicators do not accept responsibility for ecological deterioration or extreme weather caused by climate change in China as a result of PRC policies or actions. The focus of China’s media is to lay the responsibility for climate change to the West, thus paving the way for the overarching anti-Western global development narrative, according to which China is capable of providing alternative modernity. In contrast, Russian media spreads conflicting narratives about the causes of climate change, including hypotheses attributing it to non-human causes.

While Moscow engages in controlled chaos, Beijing’s strategy is streamlined and consistent with its pursuit of “discourse power” and an “active role” in global governance.<sup>145</sup> Media propaganda is only one of the vehicles in China’s systemic approach, supplemented by a strategic institutional presence and standard-setting efforts. Beijing maintains

and pursues positions in the most influential global climate platforms, such as the UN, to normalise Chinese political phrases within the international mainstream climate discourse, creating a feedback loop between narratives and institutions.

This means that the two actors require different policy responses tailored to their respective strategies. Beijing's climate and environmentally-based media narratives fall into the realm of propaganda, aiming to "fully demonstrate China's climate ambition,"<sup>146</sup> while Moscow's are contradictory and fragmented, falling into the realm of active measures and disinformation, making the latter more challenging to counter.

The successful manipulation of climate narratives by China and Russia complicates global climate policy. Framing the debate in terms of moral and economic justice challenges the consensus needed for effective international climate action. This shift allows both nations to present themselves as champions of developing countries, opposing Western dominance and advocating for fairer economic policies. The common themes between the two countries involve accusing Western powers of hypocrisy and advocating for a multipolar world order.

The international community must find ways to engage with China and Russia on climate issues, while addressing their concerns about economic and geopolitical fairness. Broadly, counter-narratives could highlight the genuine need for climate action and the benefits of a global transition to green technologies.

Russian actions can be countered based on the anti-FIMI tactics developed by the EU EEAS, expanding them into NATO and likeminded space: strengthening situational awareness, developing a dedicated toolbox to address FIMI, providing strategic communications support, strengthening public resilience.<sup>147</sup> Chinese actions in the propaganda arena can also be stifled via strengthening situational awareness and strengthening public resilience, but the ultimate actions lie beyond the realm of narratives.

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of climate and environmentally based narratives propagated by China and Russia. However, if mutual discursive enhancement between Russia and the PRC were to increase, the yield of such narratives would grow. In the future, further research on the downstream effects of Russian and Chinese climate narratives in NATO nations via polling and societal research would help assess their actual impact, effectiveness and risks.<sup>148</sup> This would provide a clearer understanding of how these narratives can influence public opinion and policy, enabling better strategic response to counteract their effects.

# Endnotes

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