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DRAGON'S ROAR AND BEAR'S HOWL: CONVERGENCE IN SINO-RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN NATO COUNTRIES?

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ISBN: 978-9934-619-34-2

Authors: Richard Q. Turcsányi, Jan Daniel, Vojtěch Bahenský

Content Editor: Merle Anne Read

Project Managers: Alvin Lim, Yukai Zeng

Design: Kārlis Ulmanis

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NATO STRATCOM COE

11b Kalnciema Iela

Riga LV1048, Latvia

www.stratcomcoe.org

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Introduction

Russian – and increasingly also Chinese – information operations have in recent years been at the forefront of the threats assessment in NATO countries. Concerns about China’s power and its challenge to the existing Western-led international order, together with its attempts to increase its information influence, make the Chinese efforts in the information domain a strategic and security issue, leading to its explicit inclusion in the new NATO Strategic Concept at the Madrid 2022 summit.¹ Russia’s fully fledged invasion of Ukraine in 2022 dramatically raised the stakes in countering long-standing Russian influence operations in NATO countries, with tensions reaching levels unseen since the end of the Cold War. The Russian war on Ukraine and its fallout have also put the relationship between Russia and China increasingly under the spotlight.

The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept states that ‘the deepening strategic partnership between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests’.² While the limited cooperation between China and Russia and the distancing comments on the Chinese side after the onset of the Russian war on Ukraine might question the ‘friendship with no limits’ between the two,³ the nature

and implications of such friendship in the information domain remain under-studied. The existing accounts⁴ remain largely anecdotal and offer a poor basis for the development of policies to counter both countries’ information operations, as well as to address implications of the synergies or cooperation between them in the information domain.

In response to those challenges, this paper has three main goals. The first is to



characterise both the Russian and Chinese information operations aimed at NATO countries, focusing on their goals, content, and methods. The second is to explore synergies and convergences between their respective operations in NATO countries. Finally, the third goal is to suggest measures aimed at effectively countering those activities.

In order to achieve these goals, we build on existing empirical research findings regarding the Chinese and Russian information operations, as well as various available anecdotal indications, which we attempt to put under a comprehensive analytical framework to glean a fuller picture of the situation. With regard to the exploration of possible synergies and convergence or cooperation between Russian and Chinese operations, we formulate an original framework which enables rigorous analysis and the proper organisation of the limited pieces of evidence available to inform the bigger picture. We complement the resultant understanding of the information operations of the two countries by consulting results from a new public opinion survey in ten selected NATO countries (and two upcoming members), to establish to what extent public opinion in the Alliance may be sympathetic to the narratives and worldviews of Russia and China.

We argue that while there have been growing similarities in China's and Russia's information activities, there also continue to be important differences. The process of convergence was primarily due to China

adopting some (but not all) of the features of Russian information efforts. So far there has been rather limited evidence of Russia learning from China in terms of information operations.⁵ The two actors have long shared discontent with the US-led international system and what they similarly perceive as the information dominance of the West. In recent years China has adopted some of the confrontational and covert tactics which Russia has been using for a longer time. This includes spreading conspiracy theories, employing fake accounts on social media, and others, especially as a result of escalating tension with the West over issues such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and COVID-19. After the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the Chinese official narratives followed to a certain extent the Russian script, especially the attempt to blame the US for being the underlying cause of the conflict and presenting the main obstacle to a resolution. At the same time, other Russian narratives, for instance those on 'Nazi' Ukrainian leadership and the supposed 'genocide' of Russians in Ukraine, were not picked up by Chinese information campaigns. China has also drawn what appears to be a red line for Russia not to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, signalling limits of their partnership.

It is thus crucial to note that there are differences between China and Russia, and it is likely that they will continue in the foreseeable future. China attempts to offer positive and constructive narratives

to the international community (especially towards the Global South), much more so than Russia, and so far it has largely restrained itself from directly attempting to disrupt societies within NATO countries. While some disruptions of Chinese influence operations can certainly be observed, they can be considered primarily as collateral damage in efforts to protect the image of China and damage the image of the US. The combination of convergence and difference between Russian and Chinese information operations means that an effective response to the challenges posed needs to recognise both their overlaps and synergies as well as their differences. This naturally makes it even more challenging to devise and implement an effective policy response within the NATO alliance and member countries.

The paper first deals with conceptual and theoretical issues. In the next section, a deductively constructed analytical framework

for the study of convergence and synergy between the information operations of the two countries is introduced. In its empirical part, the paper first reviews the general history of the relationship between China and Russia after the end of the Cold War. This is followed by a discussion of the patterns of Russian and Chinese information operations against NATO countries, with special focus on the selected topical cases of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. The next section directly compares Russian and Chinese efforts, discussing areas of convergence, its possible sources, and its implications. The penultimate section complements the findings with the quantitative results of a survey of public opinion of ten NATO countries and two upcoming members to evaluate to what extent public sentiment within NATO is open to the worldviews promoted by Russia and China. The final part of the paper summarises the results and provides policy recommendations to counter Russian and Chinese information operations.



Information influence: Conceptualisation

Given the broad and increasingly confusing professional vocabulary surrounding states' efforts in the information domain, we must begin by clarifying the focus of this report and situate it within the expanding field of inquiries into influence operations. **This is important both to clarify the scope of this paper and to provide the context for the investigation of both Russian and Chinese information efforts – and to suggest possible ways to counter them.** The conceptual discussion is all the more crucial given the goal of this paper to compare information interventions in the NATO information space by two state actors with arguably distinct approaches.

The information domain can be profoundly shaped by tools such as elite capture and espionage that states employ beyond information operations, and also by economic or military statecraft. While those can generally be seen as synergistic with information operations and/or can enable specific information operations, they can also produce their own effects in the information domain. An easy example of power generating results in the information domain without necessarily using information operations is soft power as theorised by Joseph Nye.⁶ Attraction and perceived legitimacy can generate shifts in national discourse without amplification by states' information operations.

When looking primarily at information operations, as we do in this paper, there is still a broad variety of approaches to be considered, as recent research amply illustrates.⁷ The lexical situation is generally worsened by the extensive normative baggage that a number of employed terms carry. This is especially

true for contentious differences between public diplomacy and propaganda and various 'shades' of propaganda, as it has often been disaggregated into white, grey, and black. This distinction highlights the subjectively perceived different truthfulness and goals of the promoted content. Similar distinctions may be visible between other related terms often used in public discussion on these topics, such as 'soft power' vs 'sharp power', or 'disinformation' and 'misinformation'.

'Disinformation' and 'misinformation' are often raised when analysing the intention behind a specific information influence effort. While the concept of misinformation might mean the provision of false or misleading information without trying to purposefully manipulate those who receive such information, the notion of disinformation rather points to intentional misleading. This distinction and emphasis on the purpose of providing misleading information led to the coining of the term

‘malinformation’, which highlights the malign intent behind propagating the information in question. A typically cited malign intention is to disrupt the target society and/or its public discourse and decision-making. While it is helpful to point out the purposefulness of certain practices, the limits of this approach lie in both the difficulty of discerning the intent behind the information and the potential for disagreement about whether particular efforts to change opinions are or are not detrimental to the target audience.

Putting aside the less than satisfactory state of the professional lexicon in the study of information interventions, in this paper we will focus broadly on the relevant information operations by Russia and China within the NATO information space, without necessarily delving into whether they constitute malign information, disinformation vs misinformation, etc. We similarly use ‘information operation’ as an umbrella term encompassing information interventions through any channel and both overt and covert.



A framework for analysis

Observing similarities between Russian and Chinese information operations might easily be taken as a sign of their cooperation. Both are autocratic regimes and, in many respects, they share enmity towards Western dominance in international relations. Both also seem to seek to expand their relationship. However, assuming cooperation as a cause of observed convergence could prove mistaken, with negative implications for policymaking towards the two adversaries in general and to specific countermeasures to their convergence in particular.

It is, therefore, important to clearly articulate an analytical framework which elucidates a more nuanced view on how to describe areas of convergence and what theoretically

plausible explanations for this convergence might be. While the focus of this paper is on China and Russia in the context of their information operations towards NATO, the

Analytical framework for convergence of information operations			Domains of convergence		
			Methods	Content	Goals
Processes of convergence	Cooperation	The actors actively cooperate or coordinate their operations	Sharing best practices and know-how	Coordinating on propagated content	Coordinating or aligning goals of operations
	Passive learning	One actor learns from the other's operation successes and failures without the other's participation	Studying the success of publicly discernible methods of the other state's operation	Learning about the successfulness or impact of the content propagated by other states' operations	Theoretically unlikely, but possible, e.g. learning what goals might be best pursued by information influence
	Hostile learning	One actor actively poaches the other's expertise or data	Getting access to the other state's know-how through methods of industrial espionage	Theoretically unlikely, but possible, e.g. getting access to the other state's analysis of the successfulness of particular messages	Theoretically unlikely, goals are unlikely to be a closely guarded secret that needs to be revealed by hostile action to be emulated

Table 1. Analytical framework for considering possible convergence between China's and Russia's information efforts



framework is intentionally formulated as applicable more generally to other dyads as well.

The original framework we formulate suggests two analytical dimensions for considering possible convergence between two states' information efforts. The first dimension offers a typology distinguishing between three mutually non-exclusive domains in which convergence can be observed: methods and techniques, content, and finally goals. The second dimension, drawing inspiration mainly from the literature on policy diffusion⁸ and military innovation diffusion⁹, suggests a typology distinguishing between three mutually non-exclusive processes which can produce convergence: cooperation, passive learning, and hostile learning. The whole framework is overviewed in Table 1, and both dimensions and their categories are discussed in detail below, as well as the observability of the empirical evidence of convergence in suggested domains and processes leading to this convergence.

Three areas of potential convergence

To start with the first axis, we can analytically distinguish three distinct domains of convergence: methods, content, and goals. While this typology runs a certain risk of arbitrariness and is not always entirely clear-cut, we would maintain it offers analytical utility, especially as the identified domains are differently suited to processes of convergence. Each of these deserves further at-

tention to discuss how they differ, how they relate to each other and what observables they may produce.

The first potential area of convergence is methods and techniques employed in the information operations. Those could also be described as tactics of the operations. Methods in principle respond to a number of questions that might be asked regarding particular national efforts at information operations: What channels are used? What cognitive techniques do operations utilise to influence the target audience? What actors are employed in what fashion to facilitate the spread of the information? What means or procedures are employed to conceal the originator or purpose of the information operation? While some assumptions about how the information operations were supposed to work according to the originator might be required, convergence in methods should generally be relatively straightforwardly observable. At the same time, convergence in methods does not automatically lead to synergies between the two concurrent operations.

The second area where convergence might be occurring is the content that the information operations push to the target audiences. While the area of employed techniques is principally concerned with the question 'how', the area of content straddles the space between the questions 'how' and 'what', depending on whether the spread of a particular narrative is perceived as an end in its own right. Convergence



” Observing similarities between Russian and Chinese information operations might easily be taken as a sign of their cooperation.

of narratives is relatively the easiest of the three areas to observe, as long as it is possible to correctly identify sources of the narratives belonging to respective states whose information efforts are converging. Convergence of narratives also generates synergistic effects of amplifying given narratives between the concurrent operations, even if the two operations do not share the same goals.

Finally, the third area of convergence lies in the goals of the respective national information influence efforts. It is well understood that particular information efforts generally have aims beyond the proximate goals of spreading particular narratives or muddling the information space. To give a few examples, possibly the most commonly invoked among the strategic aims of disinformation are undermining the cohesion of target societies, lowering trust in public institutions or media, or subverting specific national processes such as elections or referendums. Additionally, aims should also be understood as relating to particular target countries or communities. Indeed, convergence

in targeting particular states or audiences can be seen as convergence of goals, but could also be seen as convergence of methods. In other words, lowering trust in NATO in one particular country might be motivated by seeking to disrupt that particular country (when it would be the main goal), but also to disrupt the Alliance more broadly (when it would be rather a method). Convergence in goals is most likely to produce synergistic effects between the operations of the two states against the same target, as both actors are trying (possibly through different methods or content) to achieve a shared outcome.

Convergence in the aims of information efforts is difficult if not impossible to observe directly, but can be deduced from the content and methods employed, as well as from the broader foreign and security policies of the originating state. Convergence of aims is significant especially because those aims dictate suitable content and techniques to achieve goals and therefore can produce convergence in the two previously discussed areas.

Three processes of convergence

The second axis along which convergence in information operations can be analytically differentiated is the processes through which the convergence is taking place. There are three theoretically possible distinct routes through which such convergence may occur: cooperation, passive learning, and hostile learning. These were identified as a typology covering the possible pathways through which convergence might take place, differentiated mainly on the basis of the different levels of participation in the process by the respective actors of convergence. It is important to emphasise that these three processes are not mutually exclusive, even if they may under some circumstances negatively affect each other, as is discussed below.

‘Cooperation or coordination’ between actors is possibly the most obvious route through which convergence can occur. In such cases, the actors involved perceive it as in their interest to consciously cooperate or coordinate their efforts. The cooperation can have several forms depending on the area in which it takes place and the level of trust between the actors. At the level of aims, it can consist of political dialogue aligning the goals of the respective states’ operations; at the level of methods and content, sharing their experience of the effectiveness or suitability of particular aims or analysis of particular target audiences.

Theoretically, coordination at the content level does not require sharing ‘proprietary’

knowledge of why certain particular content was selected to achieve a given goal. Sharing methods and analysis of their effectiveness theoretically requires the greatest level of trust between the actors, as the sharing state cannot control whether the recipient will use them in line with the provider’s interest,¹⁰ especially given the covert/clandestine nature of the information operations, which makes information imbalances greater and verification more difficult. Finally, it is important to recognise that cooperation can also be purely one-sided, where one side decides to align its goals or messages to support the other state’s efforts without active two-sided cooperation, just because it fits its needs and interests at that point in time.

The possibility of one-sided cooperation brings us to the second general process through which convergence may occur – ‘passive learning’. This process is logically applicable only to the areas of methods and content. Passive learning in the case of information influence is massively enabled by the fact that data on the other actors’ information influence operations are generally publicly available. Additionally, a lot of the research into what methods and content are effective exists in the public domain. Thus any actor attempting to achieve the best possible results through the use of information operations can therefore take lessons from other states without their active involvement.

The scope and volume of the existing scholarship demonstrate a degree of



knowledge that can be gleaned from publicly available information, and there is no reason why other states could not use the opportunity to learn from the same basic data and research. Presuming that each perpetrator of the information operation seeks to achieve the best possible result and that not all methods and content are created equal, passive learning will inevitably lead to a degree of isomorphism in information operations. This is especially true if both the original perpetrator and the one learning from them pursue similar goals or target audiences. In such cases, passive learning is further facilitated by the ability to learn from very similar cases. For instance, should China seek to disrupt domestic politics and society in the US, existing Russian information operations against the US, and the wealth of research discussing their forms and efficacy, would provide ample study material to learn from and follow the tactics that proved successful.¹¹

Finally, the last process through which convergence may occur is what could be termed 'hostile learning'. Equivalent to poaching and industrial espionage, the learning actor can seek to acquire the expertise and proprietary knowledge of the other state, but, in contrast to cooperation, do so without the accession of the other side. Hostile learning is theoretically rather unlikely in the domain of goals and most likely in the area of methods, where passive learning possibilities will be most limited and the originators of the methods will be least likely to part with their knowledge willingly, as described above. Hostile learning can theoretically also take the form of poaching skilled personnel, hijacking networks of influence, collecting user data within the other's network or luring the audience from the other's social platforms. The obvious drawback to employing such methods is the risk of discovery and running afoul of the target, which can undercut mutual trust and make cooperation or coordination much less likely.



Russia-China relations:

Enemies and friends

Before we delve specifically into a discussion of Russian and Chinese information capabilities and an analysis of potential convergence between the two, it is useful to briefly review the broader context of their bilateral relations, which highlights the fact that the two sides are not natural friends and have actually faced each other a few times in history as enemies.

Sino-Russian relations go back centuries and carry with them substantial historical baggage. Russia was one of the European powers that participated in what is today referred to in China as the 'century of humiliation'. In fact, China lost substantial parts of its historical territory to Russia, including areas of today's city of Vladivostok, which was established during the same time as the British colony of Hong Kong. However, while China continues to perceive the issue of Hong Kong highly sensitively, even after its handover in 1997, the territories lost to Russia are usually only discussed in Chinese nationalist circles on the internet and are absent from the official discourse due to friendly relations with Russia.

China and the Soviet Union turned the corner on this history in the 1950s, when the two Communist powers cooperated in a close alliance. At the time the USSR provided critical help towards China's development. However, this period ended abruptly at the end of the 1950s as the two Communist regimes diverged in their interests after the death of Stalin. By the end

of the 1960s, they even mobilised armies on their borders and fought a short war, while China was preparing for the possibility of a Soviet nuclear attack. This also led to the rapprochement between China and the US in the early 1970s, creating a de facto alliance between the two for the rest of the Cold War.

Soviet-Chinese relations started improving only under Gorbachev, who paid a historic visit to Beijing during the Tiananmen protests of 1989.¹² Subsequently, however, the Chinese Communist Party supported the Soviet conservative rebellion against Gorbachev in 1991. Yet, after Boris Yeltsin became Russian president, China and the Russian Federation continued their pragmatic cooperation, and relations have been on an upward trajectory ever since the end of the Cold War.¹³ The collapse of the Soviet Union had little to no impact on the improvement of bilateral relations. During the 1990s and 2000s, Sino-Russian relations largely followed the logic of 'convenience'. Economically speaking, China became a useful market for Russian products, such



as energy resources, Russian industrial production and, importantly, weapons. China is said to have 'saved' the Russian military-industrial complex with its growing demand for weapons after the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁴

Although both countries at the time attempted to preserve good relations with Western countries as much as possible, they apparently had a shared dislike of the unipolarity of the international system in general, and 'US hegemony' in particular. Events such as the 1999 NATO campaign in Serbia (during which the US accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy and killed three Chinese nationals), the invasion of Iraq (which took place without the relevant UN Security Council resolution) or the 'colour revolutions' of the mid 2000s (which China and Russia perceived as being instigated by the West) only added fuel to the fire in this regard.

The 'pragmatic' era deepened the relationship between China and Russia. From about the mid 2000s we can also track a growing normative affinity, not just rooted in geopolitical opposition to the West, but also including its own normative content, focused on respect for state sovereignty (in the traditional sense) and promotion of the multipolar world order.¹⁵ A few subsequent events have served as catalysts of this general convergence between Russia and China.

The 2008 global financial crisis helped create the general impression that perhaps the West was in decline and the world

would soon become multipolar, with China seemingly hastening its economic catch-up with the US. In 2012 the return of Vladimir Putin as the president of Russia and the emergence of Xi Jinping as the Chinese leader further reinforced the trajectory of bilateral relations. Besides all other factors, the two leaders have also shown some personal affinity towards each other, and their relationship has led to deepening and broadening links between the two regimes, while also setting aside various anxieties and improving mutual perceptions.¹⁶ However, this type of relationship also shows signs of being superficial. While the manifested friendliness between the two regimes and their leaders does transfer to the two societies, it also reveals that their images of one another are shallow, stereotypical, and driven by the present leadership, in particular relating to the Chinese people's view of Russia being linked to the current president, Putin. Indeed, both the Russian and the Chinese populations pay much more attention to the US than to each other.¹⁷ There is a possibility that, after Putin leaves office, Russia and China might adjust their attitudes towards one another.

The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the establishment of the Russian-supported separatist regions in Eastern Ukraine significantly worsened Russian relations with the US and Europe. This led to a further shift in Russia's strategic direction towards China, which has by now become by far the most important strategic partner of Putin's Russia, as also symbolised by the opening

” The worsening of relations between Russia and the West (especially after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014) has pushed Russia and China together.

in 2019 of the new ‘Power of Siberia’ pipeline connecting the Russian Far East to China. While Europe has continued to serve as Russia’s most important economic partner, Russia has consciously tried to hedge and diversify its dependency on the West by increasing the share of its trade with China. In 2020 China took almost 15 per cent of Russian exports – compared to 8 per cent in 2013¹⁸ – and the amount of mutual trade has further grown, making Russia also one of the most important suppliers of energy to China.¹⁹

In recent years there have been growing strategic tensions in US–China relations (especially since the trade war in 2017). The worsening of relations between Russia and the West (especially after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014) has pushed Russia and China together.²⁰ In many ways this dynamic has created a dilemma: should the West ‘punish’ China for Russian aggression according to ‘guilt by association’ (stick), or should it instead try to focus on the immediate Russian threat and attempt to shelve disputes with China

and distance it from Russia by offering compromise (carrots)?

Observers have pointed out that Russia and China are not formal allies – which has led to discussion about whether the two sides would enter into a formal alliance in the future.²¹ In reality, such discussion might not be too fruitful, as China explicitly rejects the concept of formal alliances and has normative objections towards it.²² More importantly, however, the quality and depth of the relationship between the two sides have reached the level where it is indeed accurate to call it a *de facto* alliance for most purposes.²³ Still, the relationship remains fluid, and it is important to address the convergence between the two countries on a case-by-case basis – and review it over time.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is indeed an event which has significantly changed international politics, and it has also become an important factor in Sino-Russian relations. At the time of writing, however, it is still too early to establish what the actual implications would



be, as the situation on the battlefield is not stable and the outcome of the war would be crucial in determining Russia's relations not only with China but more broadly with the world. Yet a few preliminary conclusions can already be drawn.

First, it is obvious that China is split in terms of its positioning towards the Russia-Ukraine war. It is trying to balance between sticking to its long-term principles of respecting state sovereignty, and also preserving workable relations with the West, on the one hand, and not dismantling its close partnership with Russia, and also sticking to its long-term anti-US-hegemony rhetoric, on the other. Such ambiguity is easily observable in the diplomatic and information sphere. While official channels refrained from supporting the war, much of the Chinese semi-authoritative media and social media have provided rhetorical and ideological support for Russia and repeated many of its justifications for the aggression.²⁴ It is thus not surprising that in a poll conducted in China in March 2022, just after the invasion began, Russia was the country most favourably perceived by the Chinese, while the US was the most negatively seen.²⁵ Many Chinese apparently find it appealing that someone has stood up to the US, which they see as a bully trying to hold back China's rise.

Second, the process of growing power asymmetry between China and Russia has further accelerated amid the war, making Russia even more dependent on China. Naturally, this dependence will vary according to

the specific diplomatic, military, or economic area, but overall, in the process, China will be increasingly playing a role of the only partner of substantial power to a weakened Russia. Arguably, this also means that Russia would be continuously less important for China, for which Russia would be just one of many choices to develop relations with.²⁶ As China's balancing response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine also shows, China will be wary of aligning too much with Russia, as this could provoke sanctions against China, too, and undermine its ability to preserve functional relations with the West.

Third, the instability within Russia itself, which could be one potential outcome of the invasion, is probably not in China's interests, as a country which has long been 'obsessed' with security and stability – especially around its borders.²⁷ Having a heavily nuclear-armed neighbour in internal turmoil is not compatible with China's strategic goals – much less accompanied by the potential fragmentation of the Russian Federation reminiscent of the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is therefore very likely that China has not been altogether content with the war – and certainly not with the fact that the war has continued for months, and Russia is on the losing side, quite likely undermining its internal stability. Subsequently, if Russia ends up weakened, this may strengthen the West, relatively speaking. China would thus have to carry more weight in opposing the West, as its main partner – Russia – would be in a weaker position to do so.

Fourth, the shockwaves which the Russian full-scale invasion has sent to other regions impact China's own foreign policy goals – both positively and negatively. In Central Asia, countries such as Kazakhstan have become more worried about Russian influence and have publicly sought to disassociate themselves from Russia and the war. This might mean that they could be more willing to hedge towards China, which has already made it clear that it would protect their sovereignty and territorial integrity.²⁸ It is possible that the China–

Russia 'condominium' in Central Asia would be eroded, with China gaining upper hand. Previously, the 'division of labour' between the two presumed that China would play the economic card, while Russia would take care of the politics and security. With Russian aggression, and also obvious military failure to achieve its goals, Central Asian countries could be less attracted to Russia. While this could mean that China's standing might be strengthened, it could also mean that the divergence between the goals of the two countries might increase.



Russia: Goals, tactics, and content

Propaganda, the twisting of facts and the manipulation of narratives were an inseparable part of Russian and Soviet foreign policy during and after the Cold War. But the contemporary form of Russian information operations in the West is rather a result of recent changes in the international media and information environment and the availability of new means of communication. As with other countries with the ambition to tell their story globally,²⁹ the new media environment and communication technologies connected to it have enabled Russian official media networks, covert disinformation websites, or online trolls to share their narratives worldwide among foreign populations that in previous eras would have been difficult to reach.

Russia had been paying attention to the information security³⁰ and perceived superiority of the Western states in the information sphere since the early 2000s, but it notably increased its assertiveness in this sphere in the second half of the decade. While it was connected to the more assertive and competitive foreign policy posture that Russia undertook at that point, the shift in the Russian approach to the information environment also reflected its own reading of the global media coverage of the so-called colour revolutions and the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia. Russia perceived that its narrative on these events was not being picked up internationally and that Western narratives prevailed on the international stage and among the public worldwide. Indicative of the ensuing shift to a more confrontational mode, the Military Doctrine of 2010 spoke of 'information confrontation', and subsequent strategic documents, such as the Information Security Doctrine, openly accused the West of information interference and vowed active measures to protect

and shape Russia's own information environment.³¹ An often-cited article by Valery Gerasimov from 2013³² then became emblematic of this line of Russian thinking that accused the West of manipulating the information environment and stressed the need for Russia to develop its own means of actively shaping information as part of a broader war effort.³³

To counter the perceived Western superiority in the information sphere and to catch up with its supposed competitors, from the late 2000s Russia started to invest more heavily in its international media. Below, we present a brief overview of the main goals, channels, and methods that Russia has been relying on in information confrontation on the international stage and which have been used also in NATO countries.

Goals

The overall goals of Russian information operations closely follow the major

strategic directions of Russian foreign and security policy. They therefore stem from Russia's self-perception as one of the main global powers which is constantly engaged in competition with the West over values and interests.³⁴ As Russia perceives the West as a threat, the main strategic goal is the preservation of the Russian regime vis-à-vis the West. This includes countering the different means it believes the West (supposedly) is using against it. The second goal is to be included in the shaping of the international system and to be seen as a legitimate global power with its own spheres of influence. To achieve such status, Russia believes that it is justified in using assertive and even violent means, even if these are used in a covert and deniable manner when that benefits the Russian calculus.³⁵

The goals that Russia aims to achieve specifically with its information campaign, in particular towards NATO countries, are thus derived from the outlined grand strategy.³⁶ In general, the goals of particular information operations are often multiple and highly dependent on the specific context and political goals of Russia in the country targeted by such operations. The goals of Russian information operations could be for heuristic purposes and can be divided into four general types: (1) the long-term shaping of a positive view of Russia, its role on the global stage, and its foreign policy; (2) the limitation of Russian reputational damage in the case of controversies; (3) support for specific Russia-aligned actors in the target

country; (4) general disruption of the target countries and their societies.

Tactics

Russia has developed a spectrum of tools, ranging from official to semi-official to covert means,³⁷ to spread its narrative internationally. At the official end, Russia uses its official communication platforms such as statements of ministries, the Kremlin, representatives of the armed forces and diplomatic missions. These also rely heavily on their social media accounts to reach a wide audience, both domestically and internationally. At the less official end, Russia utilises its cultural institutes and other government-funded organisations to promote Russian narratives among the population in the target countries.³⁸

The media organisations attached to or established by the Russian state are next on the spectrum of official to semi-official tactics used for information operations.³⁹ Russia Today, founded originally in 2005 and rebranded to RT in 2009, has been considered as emblematic of the transformation of Russian communication efforts, from the promotion of Russian soft power and collaboration with Western broadcasters and critical intellectuals in the channel's early years to more adverse competition with the West in the years following the start of the war in Ukraine in 2014. Over time RT developed a wide network of television channels, websites,





As Russia perceives the West as a threat, the main strategic goal is the preservation of the Russian regime vis-à-vis the West.

and social media that publishes in multiple languages, including those that are spoken in NATO countries.⁴⁰ With its slogan 'Question More', RT gradually styled itself on the international stage as a medium that is critical of the West and seeks to highlight the stories that are supposedly ignored by the mainstream Western media and that point out the hypocrisy of the West. In this respect, RT followed the playbook developed by Kremlin ideologues in the second half of the 2000s and sought to appeal to populist sentiments on both the left and right.⁴¹

Sputnik, established in 2014 following a major reshuffling of the Russian state information agency, has been a somewhat more extreme and blunter version of the RT. Sputnik has not shied away from presenting straightaway disinformation and conspiracy theories in its programmes, while aligning in its content mostly with the conservative and far-right or far-left audiences. Sputnik is organised as a network of radio channels, news websites, social media, and various digital products that are intended to reach foreign audiences. It engages in producing a wide range of content from radio broadcasts

and podcasts to texts and videos or social media-friendly content in the form of infographics.⁴² Publishing in more than thirty languages worldwide, Sputnik in general features criticism of liberal European and North American governments and Western foreign policy, while projecting Russia's own narratives on given issues. At the same time, previous research has shown that Sputnik more often than RT reprints and recycles suitable content from other fringe media.⁴³

Besides the state-funded media networks, the Russian state also has strong connections with several video and digital content producers. The most important of these, Ruptly, is a direct subsidiary of RT, created between 2012 and 2013. Based in Germany and sharing some of its management and media personnel with RT, Ruptly employs its own content producers, but also works with local freelances and organically creates often sensational content that appears on social media. Its materials cover a wide range of areas from politics to sport and entertainment, but Ruptly often favours stories that feature protest movements or criticism of the status quo worldwide, even if



” Besides the manipulation of social networks, Russia has also engaged in covert cultivation of pro-Russian media, including those published in local languages and those that were originally established domestically without Russian involvement, yet that have become fully involved in spreading pro-Russian narratives.

it does not insert an overt political agenda in its headlines. That is markedly different from Redfish, a self-described activist digital content production company and a subsidiary of Ruptly, which takes a specifically left-leaning angle to its documentary videos, memes, or short texts and video clips. Redfish often frames its stories in the context of the struggle for social justice and against capitalism, oppression, and imperialism that allows it to reach certain parts of the global left.⁴⁴ Interestingly, in the wake of the Russia invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Redfish Telegram channel even featured a few posts about Russian civil society protests against the war, while blaming the West for the war in general.⁴⁵ A left-leaning, social justice, environmentalist, and self-declared anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist angle mixed with viral uplift and sensationalist content is characteristic also of several niche digital channels affiliated with Maffick. Targeting primarily progressive and young audiences, Maffick's channels focus on criticism of Western and in particular US policies worldwide. Maffick, originally founded in Berlin with Ruptly as a majority

shareholder, relocated to the US in 2019. It has since disputed its connection with the Russian state, but has also admitted funding from its RT parent company.⁴⁶ Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it declared that it had terminated its service agreement with RT.⁴⁷

Russian state media suffered a significant blow in Europe as well as globally in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine. RT, Sputnik, and some of their subsidiaries were in February 2022 sanctioned by the EU (and in March by the UK), which preventing them from broadcasting in the bloc.⁴⁸ YouTube blocked Ruptly and Sputnik from its platform,⁴⁹ and similar moves were made by Facebook owner Meta and others.⁵⁰ While subsequent reports noted that the bans especially on social media were not completely effective,⁵¹ they nevertheless at least temporarily limited the spread of narratives by Russian media channels on social media, and forced Russian actors to invest in adaptation (covered in more detail below in the section on Russian information operations during the Ukraine war).



Finally, moving to the more informal or completely covert tactics, Russia is also able to target Western (and other) audiences using a range of proxy or ideologically affiliated media, as well as a network of fake social media accounts, fake websites posing as legitimate news or even big media portals (such as the Guardian or New York Times), trolls, and hackers.⁵² The infamous trolls of the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and their attempts to gain followers, steer conversations, and promote pro-Russian narratives or support the polarisation of debate on social media⁵³ might represent one example of these covert activities. For instance, during the 2016 US presidential elections, IRA fake Twitter accounts engaged in supporting conservative narratives favouring Donald Trump. In other cases, they sought to discourage African Americans from voting by supporting narratives playing on distrust of the whole political system.⁵⁴ At the same time, different social media platforms have tried to improve their capabilities to detect fake accounts and inauthentic behaviour to make these practices more difficult.⁵⁵

Besides the manipulation of social networks, Russia has also engaged in covert cultivation of pro-Russian media, including those published in local languages and those that were originally established domestically without Russian involvement, yet that have become fully involved in spreading pro-Russian narratives. The most famous examples of those published in English included quasi-conspiracy web-

sites such as SouthFront, Global Research, or the Russian ultranationalist Geopolitica.ru.⁵⁶ However, the mapping of those media that act as a straightforward front for Russian information campaigns and those that merely follow pro-Russian political positions out of their own political convictions remains extremely difficult and in some cases controversial.

Content

The wide range of channels that Russia has developed also allow it to tailor its information operations for different audiences and goals. Previous research has shown that the main narratives that gain traction in society are dependent on national context and, in this respect, some national debates are more responsive to Russian messaging than others.⁵⁷

In terms of specific content, Russian information operations unsurprisingly promote pro-Russian views on particular issues. They also support rather fringe political players whose agenda fits the Russian position on the issue and denigrates their opponents.⁵⁸ They too focus on criticism of Western policies, point out Western hypocrisy and double standards, and engage in criticism of mainstream political forces and their many failings.⁵⁹ Russia plays to both the anti-system sentiments of the far left as well as conservative and far-right movements. This is done by supporting their sense of disenchantment and alienation from the present

political and social system. Russia also plays into prejudices and fears that these groups might have (e.g. concerning immigration, economic marginalisation, or other pressing social matters).⁶⁰ For instance, during the Black Lives Matter protests, Russian channels such as Redfish and others affiliated with Maffick highlighted systemic racism and the anti-police angle using primarily short videos, memes, and images, while RT and Sputnik played rather on conservative sensibilities and fears by focusing on the chaos, social upheaval, and violent disruption threatening the status quo using video content but also more traditional article-based reporting.⁶¹ In this respect, Russian tactics seem to partly amplify anti-establishment and potentially pro-Russian voices in society, but also strengthen social divisions and polarisation by inciting rage and disillusionment on both sides – a tactic that was observed across different contexts.⁶² These sensibilities and social problems which they stem from ('societal vulnerabilities') are not originally caused by Russian information operations, but are most often home-grown in the respective societies.

The second approach of Russian information operations identified by previous research has been dubbed as the 'firehose of falsehoods'⁶³ or 'flooding the zone'.⁶⁴ Employed often in reaction to events that present a reputation problem for Russia (e.g. the Skripal poisoning or the use of chemical weapons by the Russian-allied Assad regime in Syria⁶⁵), it consists of spreading a

wide range of different, even mutually contradictory, narratives that swamp truthful reporting on the matter and confuse the target audiences using a combination of manipulated images and false claims, but also speculative and polemical texts. While some of these might present completely outlandish and non-plausible claims, they still have the potential of influencing the target audience by agenda setting or initial framing of a particular issue.⁶⁶

Russian information operations against NATO states during the COVID-19 pandemic

The information campaigns that can be attributed to Russia in the NATO information space during the COVID-19 pandemic have in general sought to achieve two main goals – positively promoting Russian achievements in fighting the virus and supporting chaos and discord in the target countries. To do so, Russia mobilised most of the tactics outlined above, from its official channels through its state-backed media to more insidious and covert means of creating fake websites and online accounts.⁶⁷ It is difficult to summarise all the Russian narratives and the whole spectrum of information operations that Russia conducted during the COVID-19 crisis, especially as multiple narratives were used in different countries over time. Nevertheless, we aim to highlight at least some patterns in the Russian information operations conducted against NATO countries during the pandemic.



The content of the information operations that dominated during the first stages of the crisis often aimed to portray Russia in a favourable light, while simultaneously seeking to criticise Western governments and institutions. The Russian media, including RT and Sputnik, sought to portray Russia as a 'helping hand' that supported the countries struggling with the pandemic by providing supplies of medical material and other forms of help. At the same time, it contrasted Russian help with the supposed lack of action on the EU and US side, thus highlighting the supposed 'Western' hypocrisy and lack of actual unity and solidarity.⁶⁸ Similarly, in the later stages of the pandemic, Russia at the same time lauded its own Sputnik V vaccine, while spreading disinformation about Western-made vaccines and the supposed conspiracy between Western and pharmaceutical companies. Furthermore, Russian diplomatic and state officials, supported by the Russian media, aimed to sow divisions between the EU and NATO member states and stoke tensions between populations and governments. To do so, they portrayed the EU as unfairly treating Russia during the review process of Sputnik V, delaying the rollout of the Sputnik vaccine (and thus putting its own population at risk) and conspiring with the pharmaceutical companies.⁶⁹

Russian information operations also engaged in sharing straightforward disruptive content targeting NATO member countries without necessarily promoting Russia as a positive alternative. These narratives includ-

ed disinformation and conspiracy theories regarding the connection of the pandemic with 5G networks or disinformation about public health measures and the vaccination campaign.⁷⁰ Using state-backed media but even more so semi-official and covert means, including completely fake news websites,⁷¹ Russian information operations were able to make use of different disruptive narratives and play on the sensitivities of both the left and right parts of the spectrum. Different Russian narratives thus highlighted the potential erosion of civil liberties resulting from public health measures and conspiracies of 'big pharma' and other global elites, or discredited Western responses to the pandemic.⁷²

Russian information operations during the Russian war on Ukraine

While the major strategic goals of Russian information operations in the form of shaping a more positive image of Russia and disruption of European societies stayed in principle similar during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the specific tactics and content shifted rapidly.

As the Russian state-backed media were banned across the EU as well as some NATO member countries, and social media networks acted against fake accounts, the Russian tactics gradually evolved. Beyond the official speeches of Russian diplomats and state officials that resonated in the NATO information sphere, Russia stepped up the

” Suffering failures on the battlefield, as well as arguably in the information domain, the Russian information operations centred on promoting the Russian narrative, but with much stronger emphasis on self justification.

activity of Russian diplomats and other actors with a social media presence and ability to reach foreign audiences.⁷³ In this respect there has also been a documented shift in strengthening the emphasis on the personal brands of Russian propagandist figures or journalists, as opposed to the brands of big media companies, as the former can more easily evade scrutiny. Russian channels also moved to different social media that remained open for Russian authorities and propagandists (such as Telegram or YouTube) or that were under the control of entities close to the Russian government (such as VKontakte). In some cases it has also been documented how sanctions were evaded through simple cross-posting between different platforms (such as Telegram and Twitter) or spreading content through channels and profiles that hid their connections with Russia on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter.⁷⁴ Moreover, Russia also stepped up its information campaigns in languages spoken in NATO countries other than English (among others, French, German, or Italian) and engaged in setting up dozens of new websites spreading its disinformation.⁷⁵ Russia also gradually enhanced

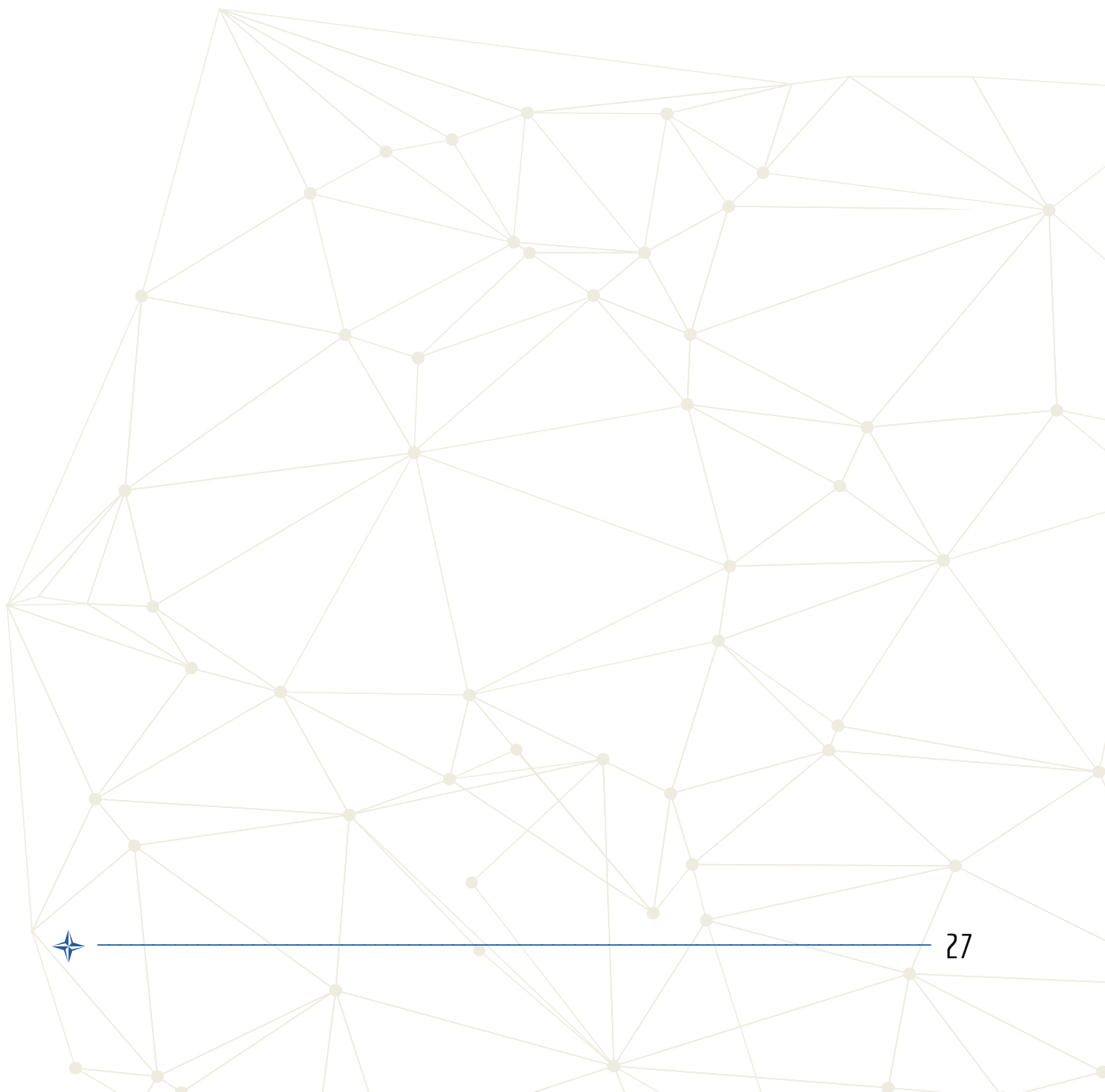
its information operations using bots, trolls, and other covert means, including networks of journalists or bloggers acting without formal affiliation to Russia.⁷⁶ These covert tactics often focused on purely disruptive activities, sharing false stories about both Ukrainian and other refugees as well as other domestic grievances already present in the target societies.

The content part of the information operations had to adapt as well. Suffering failures on the battlefield, as well as arguably in the information domain,⁷⁷ the Russian information operations centred on promoting the Russian narrative, but with much stronger emphasis on self-justification. They were also marked by lesser coherence between the domestic and external information campaigns, and rapid shifts between different narratives. Although the official narrative at the start of the conflict stressed the need to liberate Ukraine from the Western-supported far-right ‘Nazi’ regime⁷⁸ and save the local Russian-speaking population from Ukrainian atrocities, this narrative has been amended multiple times with other short-lived stories.



These included, for instance, the conspiracy theory about the US-sponsored bioweapons programme in Ukraine,⁷⁹ stories about Ukrainian satanism,⁸⁰ or attempts to build a dirty bomb on Ukrainian territory to stage a false flag operation⁸¹ which were sidelined in a matter of weeks.⁸² At the same time the primary justificatory narrative evolved in the direction of protecting Russia from the aggression of the so-called collective

West,⁸³ while Putin openly spoke about 'reclaiming' Ukrainian territory for Russia.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Russia also engaged through these tactics at extensive efforts to weaken Western support for Ukraine by spreading and amplifying narratives emphasising the costs of the war to Europe through refugee flows or increasing costs of living, and attempted to capitalise on social upheaval.⁸⁵



China: Goals, tactics, content

Goals

The single most important strategic goal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is regime security. In the Chinese context, that is dependent on the perceived legitimacy among Chinese people who are satisfied – or at least tolerate – the one-party rule of the CCP. The key stepping stones of this legitimacy in recent decades have been the continuing improvement of material benefits for the vast majority of PRC citizens, and the appeal to nationalistic sentiments by showcasing China's growing international status. These two stepping stones, however, are often in contradiction: China's economic development depends on vibrant exchanges with the world, and specifically with the West, while winning nationalistic points often leads to confrontations with other countries – again, most often with the West.⁸⁶

Chinese leaders have long recognised the importance of ideational factors in international relations. Perhaps no other country has been so obsessed⁸⁷ with its international image. This has led China to invest heavily in improving how the world perceives it (see the section on tactics below).⁸⁸ Thus China's information operations try to create a favourable information environment internationally in which foreign countries (1) generally have a positive image of China; (2) engage with China economically; and (3) do not oppose it (if not openly support it) on sensitive political issues – such as territorial disputes, human rights, and others.

From the 1980s to 2000s, during the era of Deng Xiaoping and Hu Jintao, developing the Chinese economy took priority and China tried to avoid international controversies. Since Xi Jinping took over in 2012, China

has been more 'assertive'. This has manifested across many domains, including the information domain, where Chinese actors have taken more confrontational stances, especially on issues emotionally perceived as 'sensitive' and touching upon China's sovereignty and territorial integrity (such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang). This shift cannot be understood without comprehending the changes brought about by Xi. In 2016 Xi said that, while China has solved the issue of 'being beaten' (via Mao Zedong's securing of China's independence) and 'hungry' (via Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms), it has not yet solved the problem of 'suffering defamation' (by the West). Xi thus sees his historical task as making China respected internationally, commensurate with China's newly achieved status. On several occasions Chinese diplomats were urged to bolster their 'fighting spirit' in



foreign policy. As a result, China's image in a number of countries (primarily in the West and its allies) has become increasingly negative.⁸⁹

It is, however, important to emphasise that besides the discontent with the US and the West, China has been very active in offering positive visions to the world, primarily focusing on developing countries. Xi, in this regard, coined his flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, which was originally meant to promote connectivity across Eurasia, but expanded to cover the entire developing world, including Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific islands. The BRI has carried with it a substantial economic offer involving Chinese investments, loans, aid, and overall assistance to develop infrastructure and increase trade and overall economic exchanges to help the development of participating countries. The 'community of common destiny of mankind' has been another concept meant to communicate China's positive vision to the world, this time also including non-economic areas and positioning China as a responsible great power contributing to global governance, and particularly defending the interests of the Global South.⁹⁰ The very high intensity with which various Chinese actors have promoted these concepts and similar positive narratives through diplomatic (and other) visits, media channels, and 'people-to-people exchanges' (such as conferences or cultural events) can be taken as evidence that they are not just marginal empty slogans but are actually meant to achieve goals.

To some extent, China also promotes this positive vision to Europe. According to research on Chinese diplomatic discourse,⁹¹ China has talked significantly more positively to Europe (and even more so to the countries of the Global South) than it has done to the US. Indeed, one of China's goals has long been to support the EU's concept of strategic autonomy, which China perceives as making Europe more independent from the US, thus creating division in the transatlantic alliance.⁹² Since NATO is a consensus-driven alliance, one way of weakening its ability to act as a united actor is to establish friendly relations with some of its members and persuade them to take China's positions on some issues – or at least not to take the anti-Chinese stance promoted by the US. This is, for instance, what China has been trying to achieve in relation to Huawei's participation in the 5G build-up. China has also employed similar tactics in Europe regarding sensitive political issues such as on the disputes in the South China Sea or in relation to China's human rights issues.

The goals of China's information operations can be understood as (1) promoting a positive image of China and confronting critical voices, (2) attempting to undermine the image and interests of the US, and (3) supporting economic exchange between China and other countries. Another important feature of Chinese information operations is the fact that the intended audience of many individual actions may actually be inside China – either the broader Chinese public, or

specifically the leaders. This would generally apply to instances of ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’, which seems to be producing a mainly negative image of China internationally, but seems to be much praised within China for standing up for China’s (supposed) interests.⁹³

Tactics

Perhaps no other country has invested so heavily in public diplomacy, and generally information operations, as China. The basis of the information architecture consists of the official channels, including diplomacy and state media, both of which have grown to the extent that they have some of the most extensive networks around the world.

In terms of media infrastructure, China has built up a wide and deep network involving the official press agency, newspapers, TV, and radio stations to cover the main media channels. The Xinhua News Agency has over 180 news bureaus globally in eight languages.⁹⁴ The main purpose of Xinhua is to create authoritative content for Chinese officials and media, as well as for international circulation. The *People’s Daily* is the official newspaper of the Communist Party, and it includes an English print version as well as ten internet versions in other foreign languages, including Swahili, Korean, and Portuguese. The main purpose of the *People’s Daily* is to offer the official Chinese government take on relevant issues, such as Chinese foreign policy. The *China*

Daily newspaper, in turn, has the widest circulation, is somewhat less authoritative, and is more focused on appealing to the audience. *China Daily* also produces the ‘China Watch’ insert (see below).

CGTN is the main international face of Chinese television, rebranded in 2016 from CCTV. CGTN has three production centres, located in Nairobi, Washington, DC, and London, while it reports in six UN official languages. It is available in 160 countries around the world and has more than 150 million followers on international social media.⁹⁵ While CGTN may look similar to RT at first sight, the overall approach and narratives are more constrained than RT, which does not mind taking extreme positions depending on the situation and needs. CGTN instead sticks relatively narrowly to the official Chinese centrist viewpoints – making it not very appealing internationally.⁹⁶

Over the airwaves, China Radio International (CRI) has ventured into offering coverage in many national languages – with more than sixty language editions, it arguably runs the most language services globally.⁹⁷ Yet, even more so than is the case with CGTN, the actual impact in terms of generating a good image of China or persuading an international audience to believe in China’s narratives is very doubtful – often, the reporting is conducted in very poor language, making it difficult to understand, unintentionally funny, and generally very cut off from the host societies.



” The single most important strategic goal of the CCP is regime security. In the Chinese context, that is dependent on the perceived legitimacy among Chinese people who are satisfied – or at least tolerate – the one-party rule of the CCP.

Importantly, Chinese official narratives are often spread by non-state actors, which may lead to readers/listeners/watchers not immediately (and sometimes never) recognising that the content they are consuming is not produced by the given media, but instead comes from China. The Chinese media have been successful in recent years in inserting their content into many international media as a paid advert (the media insert ‘China Watch’ produced by *China Daily* has been regularly published by the *Washington Post*, *The Telegraph*, *Le Figaro*, *Handelsblatt*, and *El Pais*) or via content sharing agreements (for instance in Greece, Italy, Poland, Bulgaria, or Albania).⁹⁸ A similar effect can be achieved by relying on various ‘foreign friends’ who would promote Chinese narratives, either on their own initiative or if offered material incentive (which is, however, most often very difficult to establish).

Chinese officials and media have become much more active in recent years also on Western social media, although the activity varies between countries, depending on the need (in an already China-friendly country

there may not be so much need to be very active) or individuality of Chinese personnel (the former Chinese ambassador to Sweden Gui Congyou, for instance, became infamous for his very active and unusually confrontational style).⁹⁹ At the same time, it is questionable how successful, again, Chinese actors are in terms of persuading audiences in NATO countries: for example, Radio Ejani, which promotes CRI content in Albania, a country of less than 3 million people, has more than 1 million followers on Facebook. The Czech CRI Facebook site’s almost 1 million followers appear to be mainly accounts with Arabic or Indian sounding names.¹⁰⁰

There has also been a growth in the use of bot-like accounts and other amplification tactics. Most of these activities target Chinese speakers abroad and have concerned the issues of Hong Kong and Taiwan. But the use of bot-like accounts has not been limited to this area. For example, in Italy a bot network was used to stress China’s medical assistance after the COVID-19 virus reached the country, and contrasted it with the EU’s inaction. In Belgium a small bot

network was engaged in attacking the government's plan to limit the involvement of Huawei in the country's 5G rollout. According to a study of the Twitter account of the Chinese ambassador to the UK, 44 per cent of the ambassador's retweets and 20 per cent of his replies came from a coordinated network of 62 accounts.¹⁰¹

China has also used coercion as part of its information operations, specifically to silence critical voices. The most obvious way this was done recently was by sanctions. In 2021, as a response to the EU sanctions of five Chinese officials and one institution it deemed responsible for human rights violations in Xinjiang, China announced it would sanction ten European individuals and four institutions. Among the sanctioned were two researchers, Adrian Zenz and Björn Jerdén, as well as MERICS – a leading European independent think tank on contemporary China.¹⁰² China has gone even further when it comes to Adrian Zenz, whose research focuses primarily on human rights violations in Xinjiang and who has been a popular target for Chinese propaganda, and had a lawsuit filed against him.¹⁰³ Similar tactics have been used against other researchers working on similar issues.¹⁰⁴

Finally, there is a growing number of reports in recent years that China is increasingly utilising covert means as part of its information operations, often resembling what Russia has done for years. This includes reports about utilising inauthentic-looking accounts on social media to

overwhelm discussions and hide critical reports of China.¹⁰⁵ While it may be difficult to distinguish real accounts and people who would post out of their own conviction from those paid, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have indeed deleted tens of thousands of fake accounts originating in China.¹⁰⁶

Content

China has long cared about its image internationally and has tried to manage the international discourse and perceptions surrounding China. The main features of the narratives it has been using in this regard include references to Chinese traditional culture and economic improvements, and presenting itself as a responsible and pacifist great power that positively contributes to the well-being of all people worldwide, and specifically to those in the Global South who have struggled against Western colonialism and imperialism.¹⁰⁷ Previously, China's information operations (mainly public diplomacy) consisted primarily of projecting a positive image of China and/or restating China's positions on the most sensitive issues (such as sovereignty over Taiwan or Tibet). This started to change in recent years, with growing tensions with the US and other countries. Issues of Hong Kong's self-rule (promised under the handover agreement with the UK until 2047 but increasingly breached by the PRC), escalating human rights violations in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China, and growing tensions in the Taiwan



Strait have prompted various Chinese actors to adopt more active and often confrontation attitudes, especially towards the US and its allies.¹⁰⁸ In effect, the content of China's information operations now involves both positive messaging about China *and* negative messaging about the US. This shift became fully visible after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On COVID-19, China presented itself initially as a victim and showcased its supposedly efficient response. The narrative was that China bought the world time to prepare for the pandemic (which it did not use well, as many Chinese actors also went on to point out). Subsequently, China positioned itself as providing help and contributing to the global fight against the virus (such as by providing face masks and vaccines – the so-called mask and vaccine diplomacies), while claiming that its own model of dealing with the pandemic was superior to the rest of the world's, and specifically to the West's. Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic also saw some Chinese diplomats spreading conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus, as supposedly coming from a US military biolab and being brought to Wuhan by the US military in autumn 2019.

On Ukraine, at the UN General Assembly in September 2022, during the first official meeting between Chinese and Ukrainian representatives since the invasion, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi referred to President Xi's points that 'all countries deserve respect for their sovereignty

and territorial integrity, the purposes and principles of the UN Charter should be observed, the legitimate security concerns of any party should be taken seriously, and support should be given to all efforts that are conducive to peacefully resolving the crisis'.¹⁰⁹ This statement can be naturally seen as an expression of implicit support for Ukraine, which has been attacked by Russia, which has occupied parts of its territory since 2014.

At the same time, while China recognises Ukrainian rights to sovereignty and territorial integrity, it also points to the 'legitimate security concerns' of Russia, as well as to attempts at peaceful resolution of the crisis. In other words, China tries to balance between defending the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity (which have long been the cornerstone of China's principles in international affairs) of Ukraine, before doubling down on accusations against the US and NATO for expanding all the way to the Russian border and thus undermining Russian security and causing the war. Furthermore, Western weapons deliveries to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia are also blamed for not being conducive to achieving peace.

While various Chinese officials at times send somewhat different signals depending on the audience they are talking to,¹¹⁰ it is fair to sum up that, on the Russia–Ukraine war, China has adopted part of the Russian narrative where it suits its interests, while still trying to create a balance by referring to

principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peace, which can be seen as implicit divergence from the Russian position. Indeed, in September 2022 Vladimir Putin also recognised (somewhat surprisingly) during his first face-to-face meeting with Xi Jinping since the invasion that China has concerns over Ukraine.¹¹¹

Research by China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe looked at nine countries on NATO's eastern flank to see what messages China projected after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹¹² The findings show that the con-

tent of the narratives (as well as methods and intensity of dissemination) to some extent varies, but overall shows high similarity, which would confirm some level of coordination and/or centralisation (within the Chinese system). Overall, China presents itself as a peaceful country, while it blames the US as the 'main culprit' for 'Russia's "pre-emptive" invasion of Ukraine' and as 'a decadent and hypocritical great power'.¹¹³ Interestingly, while NATO is presented as an extended hand of the US, the EU is mainly painted as a victim of US imperialism and an actor that needs to free itself from the US.



Convergences and synergy

The key questions based on findings presented above, regarding both the patterns of information operations of Russia and China and the history of their mutual cooperation, are to what degree their information operations converge, through what processes, and whether this convergence produces synergistic effects amplifying the danger they pose to NATO member states (Table 2).

Possibly the most important area of convergence can be identified at the level of strategic goals of foreign information operations, especially in the shared interest of China and Russia in delegitimising the US as the leader of the established international order. As was argued in the theoretical framework, this also helps to produce convergences in other areas of information operation.

While general hostility to the US, as well as other members of 'the West' – if they act in accordance with the US – is a significant point of commonality, it is important also to stress the continuing differences in goals (or their relative priority) at the operational level. China puts comparatively much greater emphasis on producing a positive image of itself internationally and also invests a lot of effort into producing and disseminating positive visions of the global order. On the other hand, while Russia too seeks to build its positive image abroad, it also engages (when speaking about NATO countries' information space) in deliberately disruptive operations, aimed at creating mistrust and chaos in targeted societies. Some more recent evidence suggests

that China may be pursuing similar aims through its covert information operations, but so far their extent seems much more limited.¹¹⁴ However, were China to move in this direction, it might even use parts of Russian 'infrastructure', which often consists of semi-private entities which may be open to China's financial incentives. In the NATO space, Russia also aims at active informational support of political forces it perceives as friendly to Russian interests, often through covert means.

Commonalities in goals are best explained by the varying positions of Russia and China both in the international system and geographically in relation to NATO countries. Significantly, where their goals converge, as in delegitimising the global role of the US and/or supporting the internal stability of both regimes,¹¹⁵ synergistic effects are more likely.

Conversely, variance in goals helps explain important differences in methods employed in the information operations of the respective countries. While both countries use traditional official channels of

public diplomacy as well as state media to spread their narratives in NATO countries' information spaces, Russia aggressively uses covert methods of information operations, such as the well-publicised troll farms, bots, or fake copies of news sites. It is possible to claim that the Chinese usage of affiliate agreements to implant its message in other media is also a form of covert information influence. However, such practice remains relatively more overt when compared to more nefarious Russian methods.

Notably, the use of more covert methods of information influence seems to be an area where China is taking a page from the Russian playbook and where some learning can be observed. While it is too early for a definitive conclusion, given the limited evidence available, this may not signal increasing Chinese interest in disruption as opposed to promoting or hindering particular views as is seen conducive to China's interests. Notably, it has to be recognised that even if Chinese information efforts through covert means do not explicitly aim at disrupting the target societies, the nature of the covert information intervention will nonetheless contribute to such disruption. This might then produce some level of synergy with Russian information operations aimed to that end.

It is difficult to identify sources of this convergence. However, it seems likely that it is produced by a certain convergence in

goals, probably stemming from increasingly heightened competition between China and the US in particular. Additionally, as was suggested before,¹¹⁶ it is also probably informed by what we termed in the analytical framework as 'passive learning', that is, observing the results of previous Russian efforts of the same nature. While there is some information about visits and different forms of ongoing exchange between Russian and Chinese journalists and others involved in information operations,¹¹⁷ there is at this point no evidence suggesting that the possible shift in Chinese information operations is driven by active cooperation between Russia and China.


Finally, in the area of content, major differences between Russian and Chinese narratives were observed in the past, with the exception of a critique of US 'hegemony' and direct threats to the stability and reputation of both countries, especially China. In other areas, Chinese information operations reflect an overarching interest in focusing on particular topics deemed important to China, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, the South China Sea, Tibet, or Xinjiang. Russia, on the other hand, beyond its own specific topics, employed narratives much more instrumentally to sow disruption or create confusion. More recently, however, there has been a rise in the confrontational attitude of Chinese information efforts that might be learning from their Russian counterparts.¹¹⁸ Content is also the area in which overt cooperation can be observed, given the formal agreements between the



state media of the respective countries.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the limited convergence of narratives on Ukraine, the self-interest of both states ultimately decides how the information campaigns will be waged and whether they will align their messaging.

While focusing on NATO countries' information spaces and on selected thematic cases of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, the convergence of narratives seems to be more often than not opportunistic on multiple levels. The main opportunism lies in sharing and utilising narratives which fit the goals of both countries, especially in the

case of the common goal of attacking the role of the US in world events. This can be seen as a common denominator of many shared narratives in relation to both COVID-19¹²⁰ and the war in Ukraine.¹²¹ The other level of opportunism most likely lies with the less than coordinated nature of especially Chinese embassies' information efforts, where more aggressive statements taken from Russian information operations are at times judged to be aimed at demonstrating toughness at home rather than achieving aims abroad.¹²² The opportunistic nature of the shared content highlights the degree to which messages diverge, at the very least in the NATO area.¹²³

	 Russia	 China
 Goals	<p>Justify Russian behaviour on the international stage</p> <p>Promote pro-Russian and/or illiberal actors in the target societies and support the weakening of EU and NATO common positions on Russia</p> <p>Sow discord in the target societies and support societal strife</p> <p>Shield Russia from criticism during significant controversies</p>	<p>Ensure at least some NATO countries take China's positions on key issues and thus weaken a unified position of NATO as such</p> <p>Distance the US from European allies</p> <p>Promote economic exchange, such as by supporting Chinese exports and investments, access to technology</p>
 Tactics	<p>Official channels (diplomacy, state media)</p> <p>Semi-official media (social media content producers, websites attached to Russia, and social media platforms associated with the Russian state)</p> <p>Social media trolls</p>	<p>Chinese official channels (diplomacy, state media)</p> <p>Use of foreign media and 'foreign friends' to increase legitimacy and trustworthiness</p> <p>Relatively limited use of social media fake accounts</p>

	 Russia	 China
 Content	<p>Positive image of Russia and Russian policies on sensitive issues</p> <p>Criticism of the West and liberalism from both far-left and -right positions.</p> <p>Polarising and enraging content playing into existing grievances between different parts of the target societies</p> <p>Multiple interpretations of a certain event and blurring of responsibility</p> <p>On COVID-19, Russia shifted between multiple narratives, presenting itself as a 'helping hand' with medical supplies and later with the development of the Sputnik V vaccine, while also seeking disruption by promoting conspiracy narratives and sentiments aimed at strengthening polarisation and alienation</p> <p>On Ukraine, Russia mostly engaged in self-justificatory narratives, while shifting between its explanation for the invasion and seeking to deflect blame for war crimes. It also engaged in disruptive information operations, stoking tensions in target societies regarding the costs of living and refugees</p>	<p>Positive image of China in general, such as Chinese culture, economic achievements, contribution to international community</p> <p>China's positions on 'sensitive' issues, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, the South China Sea, Tibet, Xinjiang</p> <p>Criticism of the US, and refusal of 'Cold War' thinking in general and alliances (such as NATO) in particular</p> <p>Generally restrained approach, although growing confrontational attitude (so-called 'wolf warrior diplomacy')</p> <p>On COVID-19, China presented itself as a victim and showcased its supposed efficient response which gave the world time to prepare. Subsequently, China positioned itself as providing help and contributing to the global fight against the virus, while claiming that its own response was superior to the rest of the world's, and specifically to the West's</p> <p>On Ukraine, acknowledging respect for general principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, while blaming the US for NATO expansion, pushing Russia against the wall, and undermining peaceful resolution of the crisis</p>

Table 2. Comparison of the roles, tactics, and content of Russian and PRC narratives, to identify convergence

NATO vulnerabilities towards Russian and Chinese information operations: Evidence from public opinion surveys

The previous sections discussed the development of relations between Russia and China alongside similarities and differences in their information influence efforts. We relied mostly on qualitative and often by necessity anecdotal data. This section complements those findings by quantitative data, demonstrating the possible effects of and vulnerabilities to the respective information operations of Russia and China within NATO and soon-to-be NATO countries.

The data used in this section originate from the representative public opinion survey organised in August and September 2022 in collaboration with the Sinophone Borderlands project of Palacký University Olomouc.¹²⁴ The survey took place in ten NATO countries (the US, Canada, the UK, Germany, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Greece, and Turkey), as well as the two countries, at the time of writing, in the process of joining the Alliance (Finland and Sweden). The sample in each country was 1500 respondents that were selected to represent national populations based on the quotas of gender, age (18 to 65), region within the country, education level, and urban–rural divide. Additionally, in the US and Latvia, we also considered the ethnic factor as a quota. We hired the NMS Market Research agency to collect the data, using its (and its partners' – Cint, NG Research, and Marketagent) pre-existing online panels of respondents.

The questionnaires included more than 300 data points/variables, generally studying attitudes towards China and related issues. For this paper, we consider answers which are relevant to understanding attitudes towards China and Russia in general, and towards the narratives these two actors promote as part of their information operations. This allows us to establish how closely the public sentiments in various NATO countries reflect the narratives promoted by China and Russia – separately or together. It should be stressed that the results should not be automatically interpreted as being the consequences of Chinese and/or Russian information operations. At the same time, the level of alignment of the NATO public with Russia and China can be understood as revealing a potential vulnerability for the Alliance – and a window of opportunity for China and Russia, including areas where the two countries might converge.

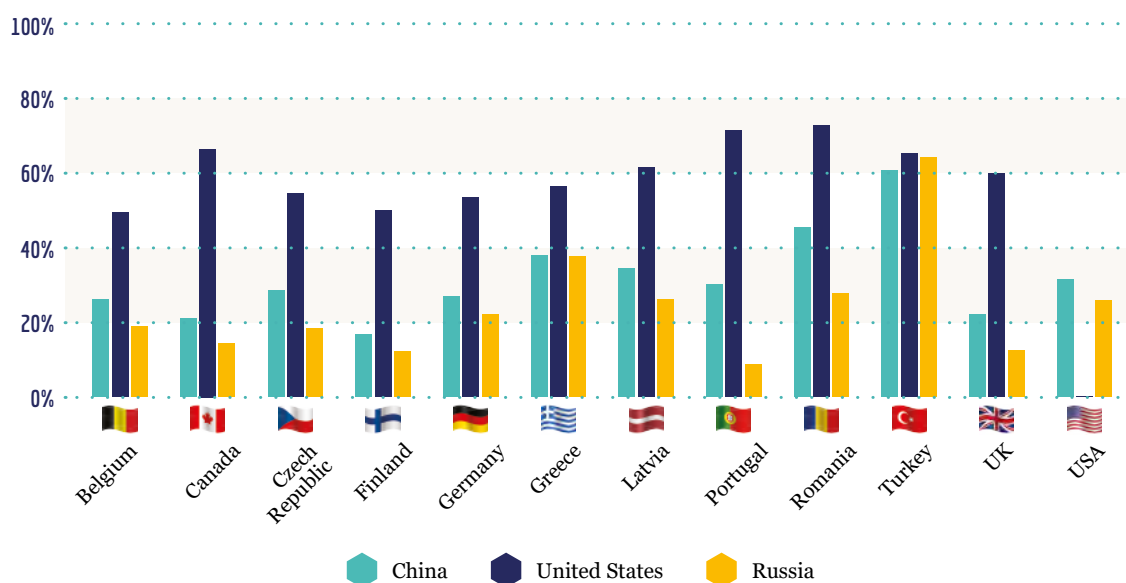


Figure 1. 'How positively or negatively do you feel about the following countries?' (percentage with positive perception)

In the twelve countries surveyed (Figure 1), China was perceived overall somewhat negatively, except for Greece, Romania, and Latvia, where the average image of China was more or less neutral (i.e. a similar amount of respondents – about 40 per cent – showing positive and also negative sentiments). In turn, Russia was seen decisively negatively in almost all twelve countries, with the two exceptions being Greece and Turkey, where the average image of Russia was again more or less neutral. Interestingly, the image of the US – as the main security guarantor within the NATO – was predominantly positive in most countries, with the two exceptions being the Czech Republic and Turkey, where the average image of the US was more or less neutral.

As a result, the NATO public in the surveyed states was overall most negative towards Russia and most positive towards the US, with China being in between and generally seen somewhat negatively. Indeed, this order of attitudes towards the three countries was present in all but one of the surveyed countries (Turkey). In fact, public opinion in Turkey (and also in Greece) perceived the US, Russia, and China in a more or less similar light.

These general sentiments towards the three great powers are also mirrored in more concrete issues related to them. The Turkish public, for instance, preferred its country's foreign policy to be aligned equally with the US and Russia, and only slightly less so with China (Figure 2). For Greece, there was a



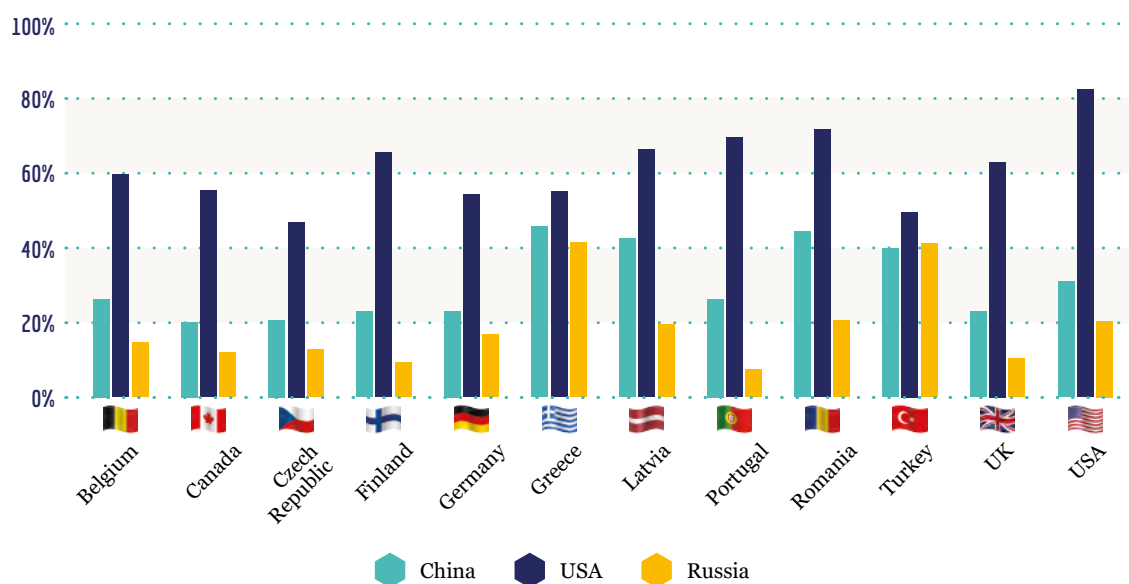


Figure 2. 'How closely should your country's foreign policy align with the following actors?' (percentage wishing to align closely)

more visible preference for alignment with the US, although the public was also relatively open to alignment with Russia and China. These are potentially worrying trends when public sentiment in two NATO countries does not make a distinction in its attitudes towards the main security guarantor within the Alliance and the two main challenges and threats, and it potentially opens up avenues for information operations aimed at dividing the Alliance.

In addition, what are noteworthy are the numbers from the US, where public sentiment was relatively more open to alignment with Russia and China than it was in most other NATO countries. Similarly, while the US respondents were predominantly negative about both China

and especially Russia, they did not stand out compared to the respondents in the other NATO countries. This may go somewhat against the government positions, where the US may be considered the leading force behind strong positions, especially on China. Indeed, in terms of the US public attitudes towards Russia, only Turkish and Greek respondents were more positive towards Russia than were the US respondents. Again, this may be a worrying finding, given the fact that the US is the main security guarantor of the Alliance, which is facing Russian military aggression on its eastern border. At the same time, this may also point to the fact that the US itself feels more threatened by China than by Russia, which many might simply perceive more as a problem for Europe than for the US.

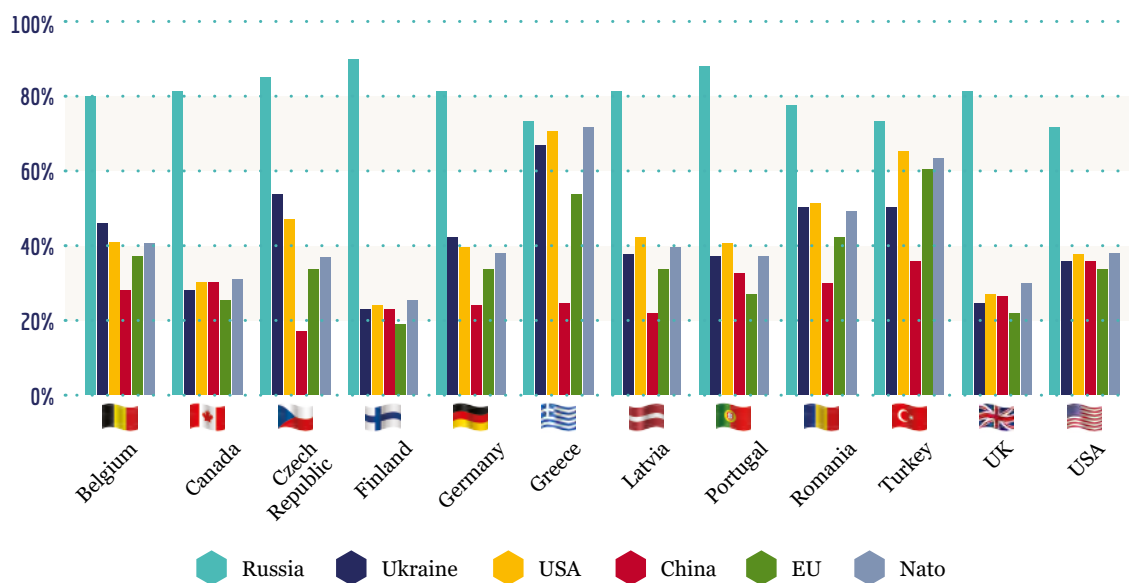


Figure 3. ‘Who is to be blamed for the Russia–Ukraine war?’ (percentage assigning blame)

Moving on towards the specific issues which are often addressed by Russian and/or Chinese information operations, we will look at how respondents in the surveyed countries thought about a few main issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia–Ukraine war.

Substantial numbers of respondents in Turkey, Romania, Latvia, Greece, and, interestingly, also in the US believed that COVID-19 was brought to China by the US military – a conspiracy promoted originally by some Chinese media and diplomats. Even more popular was the ‘competitive’ conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was artificially made and intentionally spread by China. This conspiracy was popular particularly in Turkey, Romania, the US, Greece, Portugal, and Latvia. We also

asked respondents about a conspiracy that COVID-19 does not really exist. While this theory was less popular, a substantial numbers of respondents in Romania, Turkey, Latvia, and the US believed it to be true.

These findings indicate that substantial parts of populations in some NATO countries are open to conspiracy thinking related to the origin of COVID-19 – whether they are related to China and the US or not. At the same time, we can also note that the ‘anti-China’ conspiracy (that COVID-19 was spread by China intentionally) was more popular than others, which may indicate that general negativity towards China translates to greater openness to support the theory assuming China is the ‘ultimate villain’. While this may not necessarily be a direct threat to the Alliance and its member



states, it should be emphasised that there is a correlation (Pearson's $r = 0.4-0.5$) between the support for all these conspiracy theories, pointing towards some systemic problems which may be undermining the security of the Alliance within the information domain.

When asked whom to blame for the Russia–Ukraine war, the most blamed actor from among the given options (which included Russia, Ukraine, the EU, the US, NATO, and China) was Russia, which was blamed by the majority of respondents in all twelve surveyed countries (Figure 3). However, the respondents in Turkey, Greece, and the US were less sure about that, compared to others. In fact, the Greek public also blamed Ukraine for the war, while the public in Turkey, Romania, and Belgium also put part of the blame on Ukraine. Moreover, in Greece and Turkey the US was blamed even more strongly than Ukraine for the war, in Romania the US and Ukraine were blamed equally, and a substantial number of Czechs also put the blame for the war on the US.

In fact, the Greek public (and somewhat less so also the Turkish) actually blamed Russia for the war only slightly more than they blamed the US and Ukraine. This is in line with the findings from the general sentiments (above) and is indeed worrying for the cohesion of the Alliance facing Russian aggression in Ukraine.

To study in an even more detailed way public attitudes towards the reasons behind the Russia–Ukraine war, we presented

respondents with a number of statements representing the positions of the West, Russia, and/or China.

In terms of the statement representing Ukraine's full rights as a sovereign country ('As a sovereign country, Ukraine has the full right to decide its own foreign policy direction'), the predominant position in all twelve surveyed countries was in agreement with it, although somewhat less so in Greece, Belgium, the US, and Turkey.

In turn, the statement representing the main point of convergence between China's and Russia's influence efforts concerned the reasons for the war ('The main reason for the war in Ukraine is NATO's expansion to the East'). Respondents in Greece and Turkey were on average leaning towards agreeing with it, while Belgians, Romanians, and Americans were relatively split.

We included two more specific statements suggesting that the US was the main force and reason behind the Russia–Ukraine war. Only respondents in Turkey leaned towards agreeing with the premise that 'the USA manipulated Russia into the war, which will eventually only benefit the USA', and respondents in Greece were split evenly between those who agreed and disagreed with the statement. Greek respondents, however, leaned towards the statement that 'Ukraine just does what the USA tells it to do', while Turkish respondents were evenly split on this one. In other surveyed countries, substantially fewer respondents

thought these two statements to be an accurate representation of the reality.

We also included a few statements where Russian narratives diverged from Chinese to find out that although none of the statements was predominantly accepted in any of the twelve surveyed countries, there were some countries where the support was relatively higher. In terms of the statement that there was 'an ongoing genocide of ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine', the respondents in Greece and Portugal were more or less unsure whether that was the case or not. In the case of the statement that the 'Ukrainian regime can be classified as Nazi', the support was smaller than it was for the previous one, but respondents in Greece were more unsure about whether the sentence was true.

Finally, we asked the respondents about two statements which were less openly siding with Russia and/or China but refer to some similar meta narratives as pushed by the two (as discussed above). The statement that 'Ukraine should be a neutral country not aligned with any great power' returned more or less undecided responses across all twelve surveyed countries. However, the statement 'Instead of sending weapons to the Ukrainian government, other countries should support peace negotiations' was supported by predominant sentiments in more than half of the surveyed countries, including Greece, Turkey, Romania, Germany, the Czech Republic, Portugal, and Belgium. Only in Latvia and Finland was this statement pre-

dominantly rejected. This may indicate that military assistance is indeed perceived as a sensitive issue even in the context where the majority sentiment is negative about Russia and blames it for the war.

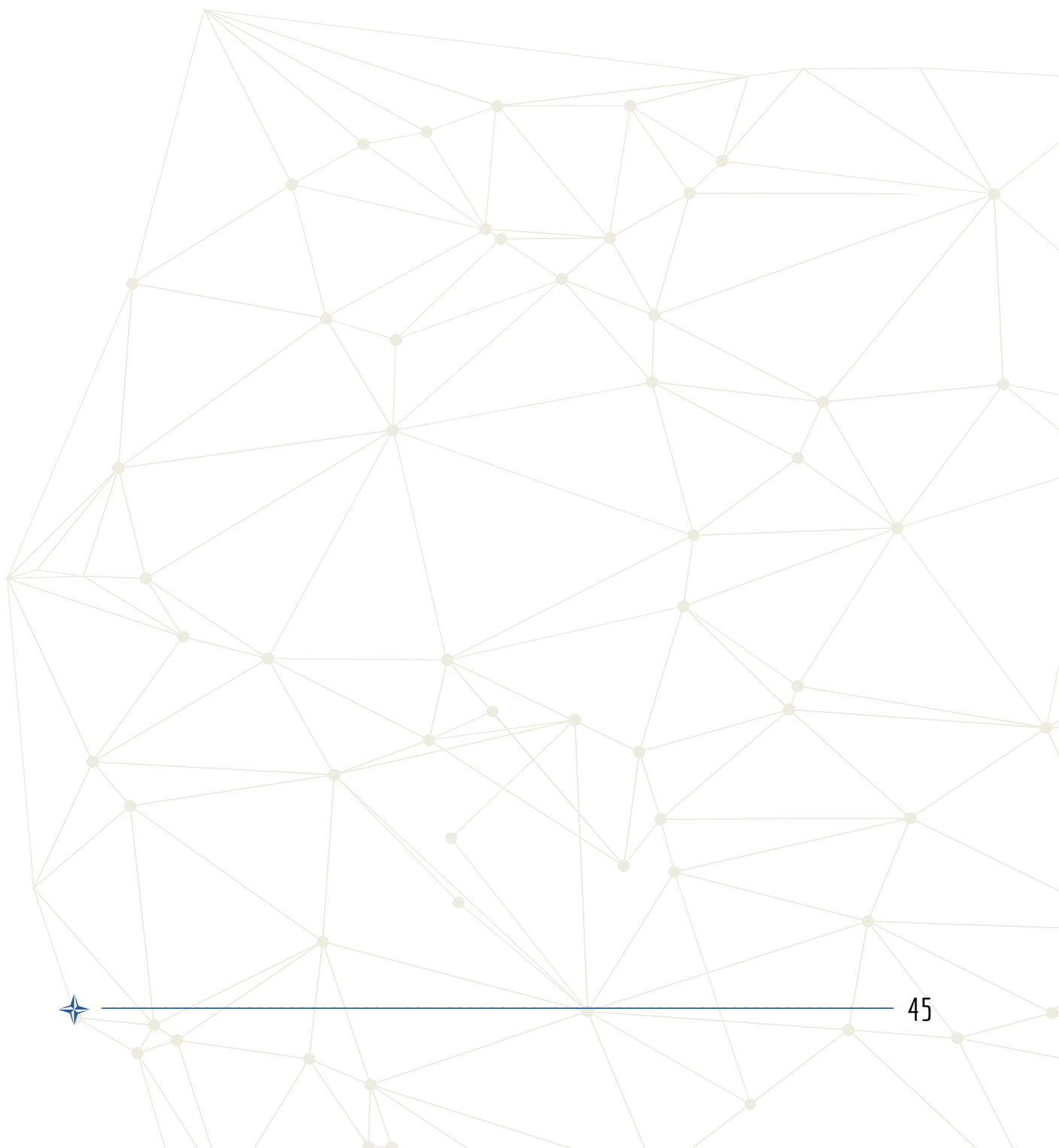
Our data give some hints also about the question of whether there are some potential synergies between Russian and Chinese information operations – and it does seem so, at least on the level of audience attitudes. We ran a series of regressive analyses on the driving forces behind some of the key statements discussed above. We found, for instance, that willingness to blame the US for the Russia–Ukraine war increased among the respondents who were positive about Russia and China, independently of each other. In other words, while a positive attitude towards Russia was a very strong predictor of willingness to blame the US, a positive attitude towards China further increased the likelihood that a respondent would blame the US for the war. Some further variables with a statistically significant predicting strength were social class, education level, urban–rural divide, and being culturally open or closed to changes.

This points to the fact that there are some important divisions within NATO countries when it comes to international attitudes – and particularly, that some parts of the societies of NATO countries are more susceptible to the worldviews of Russia and China. In the US, for instance, we found that different ethnic groups held very different opinions on Russia and even more so on



China. Those self-identifying as 'White' were much more negative about China, while those self-identifying as Black, Latino/a, or Asian were on average neutral towards China. Similar but somewhat weaker divisions were also present in terms of attitudes towards Russia. Partisanship was another divisive factor in the US, although

less strong than ethnicity. Other countries were found to have similar divisions, especially the Czech Republic and less so Romania (partisanship) and Latvia (ethnic divisions). These findings add pieces of evidence to the arguments that societal cohesion is an important aspect of defence against information operations.



Conclusions and recommendations

The report has investigated Russian and Chinese information operations, with its focus on understanding their similarities and differences and the processes of mutual learning. We have addressed the question of whether there is a trend of convergence between the two and, if so, why, and what the effects of or vulnerabilities to those efforts can be discerned from the data. Finally, we suggest ways in which those information influence efforts might be countered.

Our key finding is that the strategic convergence of China and Russia is to some degree mirrored in the convergence of their information operations. The main driving force behind this convergence seems to be mainly the increasing overlap between some of the goals of their influence operations. Primarily, the two actors share their anti-US positions and generally normative affinity when it comes to a preference for a multipolar world order and multilateralism in international relations (on their terms), as well as respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity in the traditional sense, especially for the great powers.

At the same time, it is important not to overstate the degree of this convergence or extrapolate the trend deterministically into the future. Russia seems to use a much broader spectrum of tactics and channels to approach different ideological groups in the West. This is something that China, according to the available evidence, so far lacks or does not utilise to the extent that Russia does (although some recent indications suggest this may be changing at this very moment). China also still seems

to care more than Russia does about its international image, although the increasing instances of its confrontational 'wolf warrior diplomacy' suggest that there are limits to this. The convergence between China and Russia may continue, possibly driven by the increasingly adversarial relationship between China and the West in general and the US in particular. Such adversity will likely make China's efforts to promote its image through overt means less effective and may motivate it to shift to more covert means of information influence, akin to those utilised by Russia. Increasing adversity in China's relationship with the US (and more broadly with the West) may also decrease the potential reputational costs of engaging in covert and intentionally disruptive influence efforts.

Another factor that might contribute to convergence in Chinese and Russian informational influence interventions is the shared audience in NATO countries. The results of the survey point to not only important differences in the vulnerabilities of the individual NATO member countries but also a strong correlation in the openness towards both



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Chinese and Russian narratives. The results of the survey highlight that openness towards Chinese and Russian narratives often goes hand in hand, and therefore the normative affinity towards their messaging exists also at the level of the audience. At the same time, some audiences might be favourable only to either Russia or China – in such a situation, a similar narrative might still get through to a target audience thanks to one of the two, while eventually still benefiting both. In practice, since China is generally seen more favourably than Russia in NATO member states (and in most places worldwide), some pro-Russian narratives might have got promoted in this way by China, including the situation when some Russian channels were blocked by European sanctions (such as with Sputnik and RT after the invasion of Ukraine).

Furthermore, favourability towards China was also found to be an independent driving force behind beliefs in some pro-Russian narratives (by the regressive analysis model of the survey data). This suggests that there may be some synergy effects between the

information operations of the two countries. However, the exact mechanism and explanation of this synergy lie beyond the scope of this study.

The overlap in susceptibility to Chinese and Russian narratives arguably points to the possibility of addressing their influence as a broadly defined single issue, and improving the resilience of the Alliance by investigating and addressing the factors behind this susceptibility. NATO should pay attention to these vulnerabilities and should be able to come up with messaging that counteracts both Russia and China. Nevertheless, the differences between the tactics used by both countries – including the more overt information operations of China and the more covert and divisive efforts of Russia – highlight also the need to devise more specific countermeasures to Russian and Chinese information influence separately.

One such opportunity might lie in the clear delimitation of legitimate and illegitimate forms of information interventions. While a purely security perspective would suggest

preventing information intervention by powers holding malign intent, such a step would be difficult to implement and hard to reconcile with principles of open societies and free access to information, and would possibly inadvertently reinforce Chinese and Russian narratives about censorship in the West.

A more productive direction in countering hostile information operations would be to focus more on the procedural (un)acceptability of particular information interventions. The most natural line would be between overt and covert means of information intervention, clearly delegitimising covert interventions. Procedurally unacceptable information interventions could be blocked decisively without providing ammunition to charges of censorship of 'inconvenient truths', as the blocking would not be based on content or originator, but on the method. This would require that the legal context of NATO member states should allow for such steps and that the individual countries possess the relevant technical tools to conduct them. This is where the Alliance could provide help by sharing information between the member states and developing common technical abilities. On the other hand, the procedurally acceptable information interventions could be challenged in the public space by fact-checking or debunking, with their effect lessened by clear association with the originator.

Such an approach might have the additional benefit of channelling the competition in the

information domain into the areas in which democratic societies are better equipped to prevail, and possibly dissuading further convergence of Russian and Chinese methods of information influence.

Recommendations

Although there is so far limited data that would clearly identify learning patterns, and there is little that NATO can directly do to prevent it, NATO should be prepared for the potential Chinese expansion of the disruptive tactics and narratives that might be modelled on the example of Russia (and others).

NATO should make sure that any future response would not fall into the automatic thinking that Russia and China share the same goals and tactics. Instead, NATO analysts should be mindful of their differences. These are especially present in the domain of goals behind the information operations.

Our survey data illustrate the substantive differences between the relative vulnerability of individual Alliance members, as well as within the societies of (some) Alliance members. This, together with consensus-based decision-making, clearly calls for the enhancement of the monitoring and detection capabilities in the languages of member states and for a focus on vulnerable parts of the Alliance, whether states or certain social groups.



The convergence in openness to Russian and Chinese narratives suggests wider dissatisfaction with Western policies in the societies of some of NATO countries. While there is little that NATO as a military alliance can do to address long-standing (often legitimate) societal grievances, it should be mindful of these vulnerabilities while developing its own information campaigns.

NATO should prepare an internal playbook on how to deal with different forms of information interference. While the Russian and Chinese information campaigns by official channels will always be present and need to be dealt with by strategic communication counter-campaigns, the core focus should be on monitoring and awareness of covert tactics.



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