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# CHINA AS A NARRATIVE CHALLENGE FOR NATO MEMBER STATES

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# INTRODUCTION

China is generally considered one of the greatest challenges facing NATO member states in the 21st century. Much attention has been paid to China's decades-long meteoric economic rise which has also fueled a massive military build-up. During the 2010s, China became increasingly assertive in its geopolitical neighborhood, raising alarms in numerous capitals. In recent years, China's growing interference in domestic affairs of countries around the world has attracted growing international attention, while Chinese technology is quickly catching up – or even leading – in key domains, such as 5G, AI, big data, surveillance, space, and others.

In this paper, we delve into the area of strategic narratives, which thus far has not been at the centre of discussions about the challenges posed by China. We argue, however, that it should be placed there. As China increasingly tries to “tell its story well”<sup>1</sup> to the world and seeks to amplify its discursive power, it is critical to examine what China's story is, who is it aimed at, and how China's narratives potentially affect its status and behaviour in the international system.

Strategic narratives and visions can represent key dimensions of great power competition.<sup>2</sup> Following Michel Foucault, discourse will be seen in this paper as power, and international society as an arena for discourse-power struggle.<sup>3</sup> According to Miskimmon et. al., “strategic narratives can be defined as a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors”.<sup>4</sup>

We will be looking specifically at how the Chinese strategic narratives frame the relationship with NATO member states. First, we will discuss the role of strategic narratives within Chinese foreign policy broadly conceived and outline how Beijing talks about the international system and China's role in it. Then, we will focus on China's perception of NATO and discuss specific issue narratives employed by China in relation to COVID-19 and the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), the two most recent important subjects in the relationship between China and NATO member states, by looking at statements of Chinese officials and media. Moving forward, we will analyse how Chinese strategic narratives



are disseminated through propaganda channels. We will also explore how Chinese strategic narratives have been perceived, drawing primarily on our self-designed poll as well as other recent studies on public discourses and perceptions of China.

China has been able to project remarkably coherent narratives about the nature of the international system, its role in it, and also the role ascribed to NATO member states (although, as we will show, NATO does not often appear explicitly in Chinese narratives). This contrasts with a lack of similar overreaching narratives on the side of NATO. This dynamic is to some extent a natural extension of the fact that China is a single authoritarian country, whereas the NATO alliance consists of multiple democratic polities, which often hold diverse views on various issues.

This setting may sometimes give China an advantage in terms of quick formulation and effective spread of its talking points in order to garner support for its positions internationally.

However, Chinese strategic narratives are primarily driven by its domestic political reality,

wherein Chinese actors try to follow its leaders' instructions and wishes,<sup>5</sup> and the Party overall is motivated by a desire to increase legitimacy vis-à-vis the Chinese domestic audience. These factors are increasingly contributing to the uncompromising posture of Chinese diplomacy abroad – and the persuasive effect of such rhetoric remains limited.<sup>6</sup> It can be expected nonetheless that the Chinese government will continue pushing its narratives, which at least to some extent will receive internationally acknowledgment as an 'alternative' to Western narratives.<sup>7</sup>

The first part of developing an effective response to Chinese strategic narratives is understanding and mapping the scope and nature of the challenge. When it comes to the most confrontational steps by China, such as the spread of disinformation or attempts to suppress free speech abroad, a direct response is needed.<sup>8</sup> Overall, however, the most efficient long-term strategy is to bolster the societal resilience of NATO member states and concentrate on shaping their own strategic narratives, which must transcend mere reactions to Chinese actions and offer alternative positive visions.

# 1. STRATEGIC NARRATIVES AS PART OF CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY

Since 1949, the strategic goals of China have been exclusively defined by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP views securing the interests of the Party as integral to defending the “fundamental interests of the people” and states that the Party has no “own special interests”.<sup>9</sup> Chinese leaders do not shy away from saying that “regime security” is their top priority – and here, most international observers agree that preserving the CCP monopoly over political power in China is indeed the top goal of the Chinese government.<sup>10</sup>

What does it take for the CCP to remain in power? Building on former state councilor Dai Bingguo’s three ‘core interests’ framework, stability of China’s existing political framework, economic development and securing China’s sovereignty lie at the heart of this mission.<sup>11</sup> The CCP is in power in large part due to the legitimacy it enjoys in China thanks to its ability to provide growing material wellbeing and protect national interests.<sup>12</sup>

During the previous four decades, China has become greatly intertwined with the global economy. Today, China depends on trade, investments, and technology from the outside world to a significantly greater extent than the U.S., its primary global rival. China’s dependence on international trade is especially visible when it comes to energy resources. During the 1990s, China became a

net importer of oil, thus abandoning its previous goal of self-sufficiency. It is estimated by the International Energy Agency that by 2030, China will import up to 79% of its oil.<sup>13</sup> Overall, in the early 1970s, international trade comprised only about 5% of China’s GDP. By 2006, it had grown to more than 64% (although by 2020, it has decreased to 34%, as part of growing spending on domestic infrastructure and consumption following 2008 global financial crisis).<sup>14</sup>

This geo-economic landscape creates a necessity for a stable international environment conducive to open economic exchanges. As such, during the previous decades, China’s primary foreign policy objective was to avoid international tensions and prevent a formation of an anti-China bloc which could endanger China’s ability to participate freely in international economic interactions – and consequently, fuel and sustain its economic growth. Yet with the growing pride of its successful rise and “national revival”, the Chinese public and leaders have become less willing to “keep a low profile”.<sup>15</sup> Around the beginning of the 2010s, and especially after Xi Jinping entered office in 2012, China has started to speak and act more ‘assertively’.<sup>16</sup> This adjusted strategic approach has led to tensions in relations with many countries.

Chinese foreign policy discourse reflects these contradictions and may often appear

schizophrenic<sup>17</sup>. On the one hand, Chinese diplomats want to appeal to their leaders, and, importantly, to the domestic public (which is increasingly nationalistic and rejects compromising to “foreigners”) by showing willingness to defend national interests.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, they need to reassure the international community of China’s ‘benign’ intentions. Yet it is rarely possible to prevent the spread of narratives meant for domestic consumption to international audiences and vice versa – in effect, domestic narratives influence China’s international relations, while its diplomatic communications are manifest to the Chinese public.

Chinese leaders have long paid attention to how China is perceived internationally – and they have actively tried to improve this image with massive state-driven public diplomacy efforts. In the historical Sino-centric tributary system, “it was important for the authority of a succession of Chinese emperors to have symbolically obedient foreigners bowing regularly to their moral prestige and power.”<sup>19</sup> In the 21st century, Chinese leaders can similarly strengthen their domestic legitimacy by showcasing that they are treated with respect internationally – and if not, they would be expected domestically to react forcefully to save the “face” of the nation. Thus, nominally externally-oriented strategic narratives can play a significant role in enhancing the self-esteem of the domestic population, making them ‘feel better about themselves’.<sup>20</sup>

While it may not appear to be the case from the Western perspective, China sees itself as positioned on the defensive in an international system widely perceived as dominated by the West. Chinese experts and leaders have long identified the lack of discourse power as one of the chief shortcomings of Chinese great power status, especially as it has been lagging behind the impressive growth of Chinese economic and military power.<sup>21</sup>

This puts pressure on China both domestically and internationally. On the domestic front, the influence of Western strategic narratives could lead to a threat of “peaceful evolution” and regime subversion.<sup>22</sup> The CCP thus wants to establish its official line as the only truth within China, consolidating domestic consensus, while delegitimising foreign narratives that could challenge it.<sup>23</sup> The leaked “Document 9” from 2013 shows that the CCP has a very expansive conception of what constitutes a threat in this regard: constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, economic neoliberalism, media freedom, historical nihilism and questioning of the socialist nature of the Chinese regime.<sup>24</sup>

On the international front, narratives, such as the “China threat theory” or lately, the “debt trap” meme, “wolf warrior diplomacy” label and other interpretations of Chinese foreign policy behaviour have been seen as undermining Chinese interests.<sup>25</sup> While initially, China was mostly preoccupied with dispelling these negative concepts, the move away from low-profile foreign policy in recent years has also manifested in more proactive efforts to shape China’s own strategic narratives. With China-related issues gaining increasing prominence and eliciting negative connotations in global debates, Beijing has gone on the offensive. Since at least 2019, a new trend of “wolf warrior diplomacy” has been widely observed, referring to the tendency of Chinese diplomatic representatives to abandon customary diplomatic restraint and engage in open attacks on other nations, companies and individuals while pro-actively promoting China’s narratives.<sup>26</sup>

This assertive turn in Chinese messaging cannot be understood without reference to changes brought about by China’s leader Xi Jinping. In 2016<sup>27</sup>, 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 reform), it has not yet solved the problem of suffering defamation. Xi thus sees his historical task as ensuring that China is respected internationally, commensurate with China's newly achieved power status. On several occasions, Chinese diplomats were urged to bolster their "fighting spirit" in foreign policy. "Telling the China story well" has become a new primary task for both the Chinese state media and diplomats.

## What is "China's story"?

China has developed complex narratives of the international system and its role within it. In the following section, we will analyse the main characteristic of these narratives based on the official pronouncements of the Chinese government and its leaders.

The Chinese strategic worldview sees the development of the international system determined by materialistic laws, consistent with the Marxist dialectical materialist vision of history. China often invokes teleological "trends of the times" that countries need to adapt to in order to succeed. The current international system is seen as undergoing a major transformation, put into motion by the growing multipolar distribution of power, evolving progress of globalisation, and disruptive technological change. These trends are referred to as "changes unseen in a century" under Xi.<sup>28</sup>

The focus on the shifting polarity of the system, specifically the dominant role of the US, has been a fixture of Chinese strategic thinking, although assessments of the pace of these changes have varied.<sup>29</sup> The apparent failure of the US and other Western countries in managing the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have sped up the timetable of these changes in China's perception, as did the global financial crisis in 2008 or the election of Donald Trump as US president before.

China presents some of the features of the current international system as disconnected from the changing global realities and unable to accommodate rising powers. China thus calls for "democratisation" of international relations, including via reform of international institutions, to make the world order more "just and reasonable".<sup>30</sup> China's vision of the international order is cast negatively vis-à-vis some of the features of the current architecture propped up by the US and the West at large, which it says is evocative of "Cold War thinking", "hegemonism" and "zero sum" calculus.

As a counterpoint, China presents a vision of a world order epitomised by the concepts of "community of shared destiny of humankind" and "new type of international relations" under Xi.<sup>31</sup> Beijing champions depoliticised international relations where "win-win" economic cooperation is the main mode of interaction. The desired international system is to be pluralistic, without discrimination between small and big countries, between authoritarian and democratic regimes, and between national "development choices".<sup>32</sup> Universalism is to be replaced by particularism. Instead of alliances directed at third parties, this alternative order is to be based on partnerships for positive goals of common development.

Regarding the desired image of China, according to Xi's 2014 speech to the Politburo, "China should be portrayed as a civilised country featuring a rich history, ethnic unity, and cultural diversity, and as an Eastern power with good government, a developed economy, cultural prosperity, national unity, and beautiful scenery. China should also be known as a responsible country that advocates for peace and development, safeguards international fairness and justice, makes a positive contribution to humanity, and serves as a model socialist country, which is open and friendly to the world, full of hope and vitality."<sup>33</sup>



Furthermore, it is necessary to elaborate upon the three pillars that are supposed to form the basis of Chinese identity.

**The first pillar makes use of Chinese culture to present contemporary China as a direct heir to an unbroken legacy of one of the world's greatest civilizations with 5000 years of history.** This enables shaping a nonpolitical positive perception of China and association with the Confucian values such as peace and harmony. These are presented as essential qualities of China in its dealings in international relations and a basis for China-envisioned order.

This pacifist identity is intrinsically coupled with a resolute commitment to defend China's own interests when they are under threat.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, China always presents itself as the party that is forced to take retribution for the other side's aggression and always as a last resort. This resolve is often tied to China's historical experience of being "bullied" by Western powers and Japan in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – an offence that the Chinese government professes not to allow to happen ever again.<sup>35</sup>

**The second pillar of China's identity narratives sees China as a country that has achieved remarkable development of economic and overall national power while maintaining its sovereignty and social stability.** In this respect, it is stressed that China has charted its own path under the leadership of the CCP, instead of copying Western models of development. Yet the legitimacy of China's system stems not just from socio-economic development and governance competence, but also from its unique "democratic" system, which expresses the will of its population.<sup>36</sup> China's success can serve as an inspiration for other countries, especially non-Western developing nations, willing to choose their own "development path". However, China has stressed that it will not try to export the "Chinese model".<sup>37</sup>

**The final and most recently developed pillar of Chinese identity narratives is that of China as a responsible power.** As China identifies the shortcomings of the current international vision, it portrays itself as the actor capable of delivering the positive transformation. This has most prominently manifested in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has become a main feature of Chinese foreign policy identity and the vehicle for realising the vision of "community of shared destiny". China's economic rise as such, including the much-touted success of poverty eradication efforts and overall growth of Chinese people's living standards, is presented as a major contribution from China to the development of humanity and a prosperous and peaceful international order. At the same time, China is willing to share the economic opportunities offered by its rise via BRI, providing other countries a "ride on the high-speed train of China's development".<sup>38</sup>

China also increasingly presents itself as the "defender, builder and contributor"<sup>39</sup> of the current international system and its key norms, thus complementing utilitarian with normative frames within its narratives. This contribution is manifested by China's peacekeeping contributions, commitments to tackle climate change, openness to trade and investment, and most recently, via efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

China touts its support for the norm of non-interference in domestic affairs which it portrays as the key principle of the UN Charter. At the same time, it strives to focus more on social and economic rights rather than individual rights.<sup>40</sup> China accuses Western countries, chiefly the US, of misusing global norms and equating them with Western values, as well as trying to keep China down by using "double standards" to criticise its domestic and foreign policies.<sup>41</sup>

## 2. CHINESE STRATEGIC NARRATIVES TOWARDS NATO MEMBER STATES

To assess predominant Chinese views of NATO, we looked at official pronouncements as well as the depiction of the Alliance in Chinese state media. NATO membership is not a primary framework through which China sees its relations with the relevant countries: the Alliance itself is practically absent in Chinese official communication. To illustrate, there were only 18 direct mentions of NATO in regular press conferences of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2002 and 2020 – compared to 21 mentions of the Czech Republic, over 200 of Germany, and almost 5,000 of the US.<sup>42</sup>

NATO as such has not played a significant role in Chinese foreign policy, which is natural considering its geographical scope, with China instead focusing on US allies in the Asia-Pacific. One significant exception is the role of the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. This incident has mostly been linked to the US (referred to as a “US-led NATO attack”<sup>43</sup>), although the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in 2021 that NATO still owes China “blood debt” over the bombing.<sup>44</sup>

China’s view of NATO flows directly from its narratives of the international system and China’s identity: military alliances are seen as anachronistic and NATO specifically as a “product of the Cold War”, contrasting its embodiment of “absolute security” for its members with the Chinese “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security” concept<sup>45</sup>. In Chinese view, alliances like NATO require an external enemy,

otherwise their continued existence is put into question.<sup>46</sup>

While China has not officially opposed NATO’s eastern enlargement, it has generally perceived and framed this development in negative terms. For example, the 1998 White Paper on Defense stated that “the enlargement of military blocs and the strengthening of military alliances” have added “factors of instability to international security”.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Chinese official media and expert commentary have largely echoed Russia’s critical view of NATO’s eastern enlargement as an US-led effort to limit Russia’s geopolitical space and maintain its global primacy, echoing China’s concerns over the US role in Asia.<sup>48</sup>

In their reporting, Chinese official media have highlighted the role of NATO as a tool of perpetuating US hegemony.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, they have emphasised growing tensions within the Alliance, particularly during the Trump presidency.<sup>50</sup> Chinese media have argued that European NATO member states have been reluctant to get on board with Washington’s effort to steer NATO towards a more global mission, particularly its efforts to confront China.<sup>51</sup> Similar to Chinese rhetoric regarding other US allies, NATO is also mostly seen as dominated by the US and its interests at the expense of other members.<sup>52</sup>

What then are China’s interests with regard to European NATO member states, beyond the overarching goals of gaining diplomatic support for Chinese core interests and securing technologies or export markets? These stem directly

from China's view of Europe and its role in China's understanding of the world. China continues to see the US as the most significant player on the world stage and the most important bilateral relationship for China. In Chinese thinking, since the end of the Cold War, Europe has had an important role as one of the potential poles in the emerging multipolar system, which could limit the dominant position of the US.

Therefore, China has vocally supported the European concept of "strategic autonomy", understanding it almost exclusively as a measure of "independence" from the US.<sup>53</sup> It has been China's strategic goal to prevent the formation of an anti-China alliance between the US and European NATO members.

Chinese diplomacy towards European NATO member states has usually been less stringent than towards the US. For example, in the case of bilateral 5G declarations, as those signed between the US and Slovenia, Poland, Czech Republic and others, Chinese statements have criticized the US side, while avoiding direct criticism of the European states.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Chinese MFA's reaction to Romania's passing of a law banning Chinese involvement in 5G infrastructure in the country was almost exclusively criticising the US and its "bullying", rather than Romania itself.<sup>55</sup> This follows the logic that European NATO states are being allegedly forced into adopting critical policies towards China, rather than acting of their own accord.

## COVID-19: From damage control to hubris

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought China under the international spotlight in an unprecedented manner and has become crucial for Beijing to influence the narrative about the pandemic and put its "discourse power" to use. China's attempt

to influence the narratives on an issue of such a global relevance has been quite unprecedented.

China's narrative on COVID-19 has undergone several stages. Initially, China presented itself as the victim of the disease and sought to deny its mismanagement of the outbreak. China has consistently stressed that it has shared the information on the pandemic in "an open, transparent and responsible" manner.<sup>56</sup> Chinese state media also highlighted the support from abroad, including Europe, for the government's competent handling of the pandemic.<sup>57</sup>

In the second stage, after the outbreak was put under control in China, Beijing began to present itself as part of the solution to the pandemic, touting the "community of shared health" and "health silk road" as the right responses to the unprecedented global challenge, and making concrete actions via mask and vaccine distributions. The praise from foreign countries' leaders, including visits at the airports was prominently displayed in Chinese media (and actively requested in some cases).<sup>58</sup> For instance, a doctored video of Italians allegedly cheering the Chinese anthem out of gratitude to China was shared by Chinese media.<sup>59</sup> These demands for public gratitude can be understood as mainly targeting the Chinese domestic audience, seeking to neutralise the original anger of the population towards the government's mismanagement of the pandemic.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, some Chinese diplomats and media started to disseminate conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus, linking it mostly to the US.<sup>61</sup>

China presented its contributions to the fight against the pandemic as a testament to its character as a responsible country, thus projecting its identity narratives.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the global crisis supposedly made Chinese designs for the world order, i.e., its narratives of nonpolitical cooperation on solving global issues, even more prescient.

China has domestically touted its “human lives first” approach to the pandemic in opposition to Western failures, especially that of the US, to cast its own management of the virus in a better light. In official statements in the European NATO member states, however, China has been mostly supportive of their pandemic response. In Poland, for example, Ambassador Liu Guangyuan repeatedly commended Polish government’s handling of the pandemic, all the while attacking the US response and its efforts to “shift blame” on China.<sup>63</sup>

It was primarily the US that became the target of criticism and even disinformation and conspiracy theories spread by some Chinese officials and media. First among them was Zhao Lijian, the newly promoted MFA spokesperson, who on 12 March 2020 tweeted (allegedly without asking permission of his superiors)<sup>64</sup> that it might have been the US Army who brought the virus to Wuhan in Autumn 2019. These accusations were also widely shared by Chinese Embassies abroad.<sup>65</sup>

One significant exception of a European response being officially criticised by China was in France. The Chinese Embassy posted an article, in April 2021, claiming that residents of nursing homes were being left to die in the country and contrasted this with China’s response. On other occasions, the criticism has mainly come in response to Western criticism of China’s human rights situation. For example, in response to coordinated Xinjiang sanctions in March 2021, the MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying said: “Amid the coronavirus pandemic, these most developed countries have let tens of thousands of their citizens die, are hoarding vaccines many times their population numbers and restricted supply to the developing world. Without life, where are human rights?”<sup>66</sup>

## Comprehensive Agreement on Investment: A victim of “wolf warriors”

The developments around the China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) have similarly become a testing ground for Chinese strategic narratives in Europe. The late 2020 conclusion of the CAI negotiations has been seen as a success for Chinese diplomacy after a year of worsening tensions between China and the West. Moreover, the conclusion of negotiations came as a surprise before the inauguration of the new administration in Washington, despite the Biden team signaling its willingness to coordinate China policy with the EU.

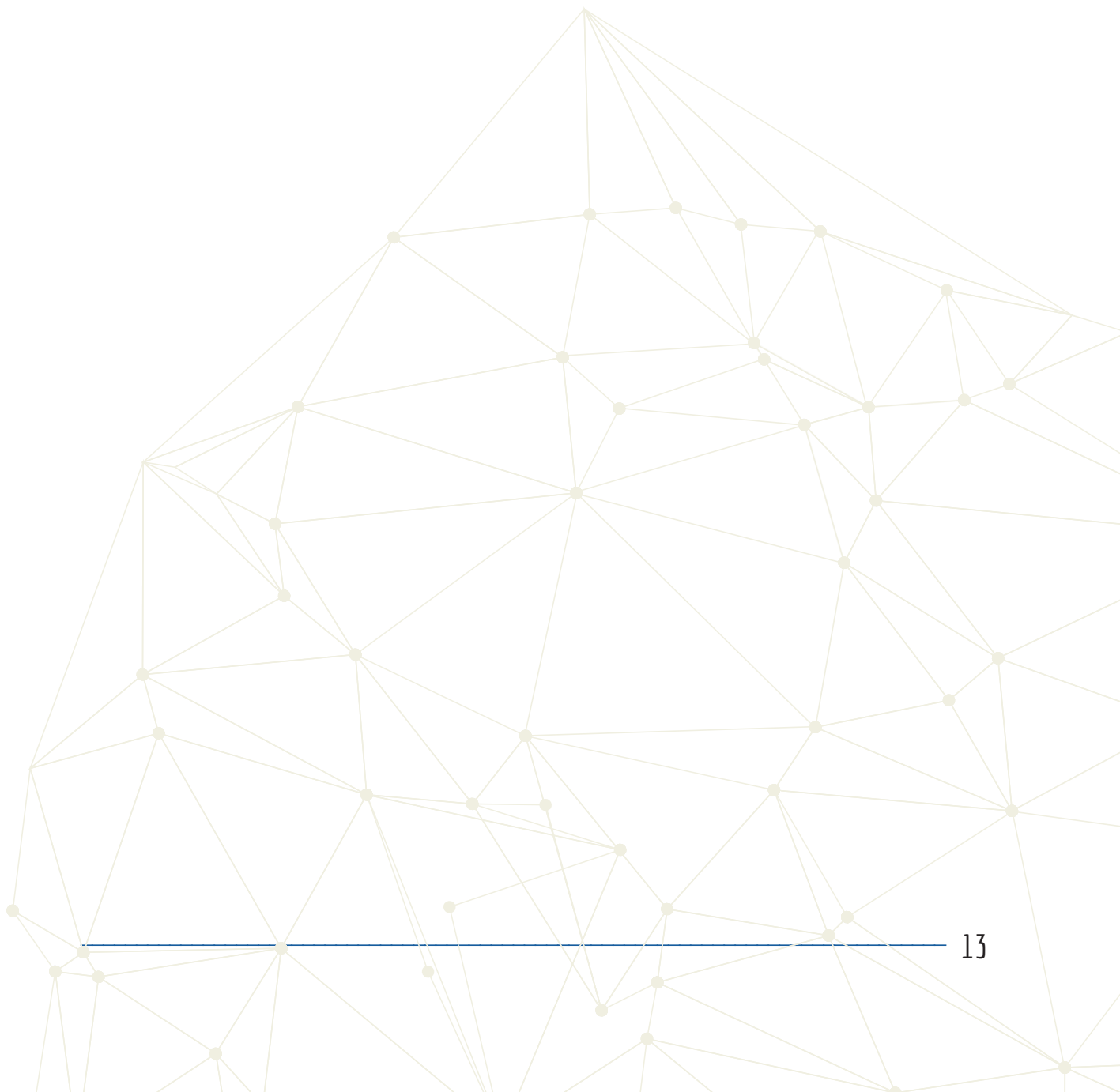
From the Chinese perspective, the attainment of the CAI deal has marked a fulfillment of the prescribed role for Europe in the world as an important ‘pole’ in the emerging multipolar system.<sup>67</sup> The narrative on China and EU as two responsible powers safeguarding the global order was mainly enabled by President Trump’s turn towards unilateralism, which was portrayed by China as an opportunity for a closer China-EU relationship.<sup>68</sup> Referring to CAI, China’s Ambassador to the EU Zhang Ming said that “in developing China-EU relations, what matters most is to proceed from common interests and make decisions independently. Only in this way can we get big things done to the benefit of both sides and the world”.<sup>69</sup>

China has taken use of the EU’s own perception of ‘normative power’ and presented the EU’s cooperation with China as a joint responsibility in

terms of building a stable multilateral international order. Moreover, China has actively sought to define the EU’s interests in a conception that aligns with its own preferences. Therefore, China

has claimed that there is no “fundamental conflict of interest” between China and the EU, even while there are differences on specific issues.<sup>70</sup> China dismissed the EU’s characterisation of China as a “systemic rival”- one of the three pillars of the current EU’s strategic approach towards China (apart from a “partner” and “competitor”).<sup>71</sup> As argued by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, “the multilateralism that our two sides advocate must be dedicated to unity and cooperation rather than group politics. It needs to transcend systemic differences rather than draw lines along ideology.”<sup>72</sup>

The apparent demise of CAI, however, shows limits of Chinese ability and willingness to persuade the European public and representatives. In March 2021, the EU decided to put sanctions on China due to the human rights situation in Xinjiang. China responded with its own round of sanctions escalating the situation and also targeting independent researchers, in addition to numerous MEPs and EU bodies. This asymmetric reaction led to the freezing of the ratification process in the European Parliament.<sup>73</sup> This way, China ultimately defeated its goal of achieving the ratification of CAI, which could have driven a wedge in the transatlantic partnership.



# 3. WHO TELLS “CHINA’S STORY”?

China has developed a wide-ranging and far-reaching external propaganda apparatus tasked with communicating Chinese strategic narratives to audiences around the world. This involves a plethora of actors on the national and sub-national levels, CCP institutions as well as nominally non-governmental actors. Although Chinese actors present largely coherent narratives, it does not necessarily mean that every step of each actor is always carefully designed in Beijing. A more accurate image of the operation of this system might be that the various actors are trying (and sometimes failing) to act in accordance with the general political lines devised by the leaders – i.e. especially President Xi Jinping and Minister Wang Yi. The system then creates incentives based on promotions (or demotions).

## Chinese embassies and diplomats

Chinese embassies have traditionally not been very active in local debates in European countries, with the exception of obligatory condemnations in discussions on China’s “core interests”, including most prominently Taiwan, Tibet and human rights. However, there has been an obvious trend towards more intervention into the local discursive field since 2019.<sup>74</sup> This trend has been connected mainly with defensive efforts against growing criticism of China over Hong Kong’s autonomy, the human rights situation in Xinjiang, and the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which broadened the traditional scope of topics discussed in relation to China.

Chinese diplomats have been trying to curry favor with the general public in China, but perhaps more importantly, to attract attention within the domestic bureaucracy that has put a premium on resolute defence of Chinese interests, in line with Xi Jinping’s task of solving the issue of China “suffering defamation” abroad. For example, prior to his appointment as the Chinese MFA’s spokesperson, Zhao Lijian had a very prolific Twitter presence during his posting at the Chinese embassy in Pakistan. He continues to be very active on Twitter.

While “wolf warrior diplomacy” has been a general trend, the approaches in different countries varied. An overview of Chinese embassies’ messaging during the COVID-19 shows that in terms of intensity, style and content, the approaches in select European countries have ranged from a low-key approach in Hungary, Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovakia, to a proactive and positive approach in Italy, Poland and Spain, up to a confrontational approach in France, and to some extent, Germany.<sup>75</sup>

Taking the example of the Visegrad countries, China has been notably the least media-active in Hungary. Between January 2018 and March 2020, the Chinese Ambassador to Hungary published eight media articles and gave seven interviews.<sup>76</sup> In Poland, for the same period, the number was 38 articles and 16 interviews. While media activity depends on the personality of the ambassador, it also seems to relate to the local environment – in Hungary, the positive image of China is created by the Hungarian government and pro-government Hungarian media, and Chinese diplomats may not see a need to actively engage in the local discourse.<sup>77</sup>

Interestingly, in the case of the Visegrad countries, the outlets publishing opinions and editorials (op-eds) are often fringe publications with limited reach and readership (for example, *Nové Slovo* in Slovakia, *Trybuna* in Poland or *Haló Noviny* in the Czech Republic). The choice of outlets seems to be based primarily on the convenience of having desired articles published at will, rather than a desire to effectively target foreign audiences. The content generally lacks local input beyond official propaganda points, and is mainly exhibit activity on part of the diplomats. Such behaviour seems more likely to serve the purpose of showcasing the activity of posted diplomats to superiors in Beijing, rather than truly attempting to persuade the local public regarding China's narratives.

## Chinese state media

One of the chief instruments for carrying Chinese external propaganda are Chinese media that are under the control of the CCP and an integral part of the propaganda apparatus. These include television networks CGTN and CCTV, China Radio International (CRI), press agencies Xinhua and China News Service and newspapers China Daily and, to some extent, Global Times.<sup>78</sup>

Apart from coverage in English, several of these outlets also have different language versions and regional bureaus around Europe, following the trend of localisation.<sup>79</sup> CGTN broadcasts in English, French, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic.<sup>80</sup> Besides English, CRI has national language programming in 13 European languages. They also cooperate with local radio stations on content sharing whether directly or through intermediaries.

A significant part of the coverage of global events by Chinese overseas media consists of reporting that is similar to many Western main-

stream media. Politically tainted coverage of China-related issues in Chinese state media is thus "hidden" within what seems like normal professional media output. In the case of CRI, which has the most localised content in Europe out of the Chinese media, the focus seems to be on quantity rather than quality. CRI content appears to be mostly produced centrally and later translated into respective languages. The quality of translations in some languages makes much of the content hard to understand, often to the point of being nonsensical or unintentionally humorous. Moreover, a significant part of the output is identical to the CCP domestic propaganda and not tailored to specific international audiences – thus it can be hardly expected to succeed in terms of popularity or persuasion.

## Social networks

Since 2019, there has been a dramatic growth of presence of Chinese officials on Facebook and Twitter in what has clearly been a coordinated push. Chinese Embassies or Ambassadors in 20 out of 27 European NATO member states have opened Twitter accounts.<sup>81</sup> In 17 cases, the accounts have been established since July 2019. Chinese Embassies have established official pages on Facebook in 17 countries. Similar to Twitter, all but five have been created since July 2019. The official diplomatic accounts have bolstered the pre-existing social media presence of Chinese state media, which have started appearing on Facebook and Twitter already around 2009.

Chinese state media have also become very active online, including on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This has arguably become a more important channel for targeting foreign audiences, as the reach of traditional broadcasters/ newspapers is limited. CGTN and People's Daily are among the 15 most popular Facebook pages

globally as the only news-affiliated accounts.<sup>82</sup> Some of the follower numbers of Chinese state media, however, provoke skepticism. For example, Radio Ejeni, which promotes CRI content in Albania, a country of less than 3 million, has more than one million followers on Facebook.<sup>83</sup> The Czech CRI Facebook site's almost 1 million followers appear to be mainly accounts with Arabic or Indian sounding names.<sup>84</sup>

There has also been a growth of use of bots and other amplification tactics and their instrumentalisation in concerted information campaigns. According to prior research, most of these activities target Chinese speakers abroad and have concerned the issues of Hong Kong and Taiwan.<sup>85</sup> The use of bots has not been limited to this area. For example, in Italy, a bot network was used to stress China's medical assistance to the country and contrast it with the EU's inaction.<sup>86</sup> In Belgium, a small bot network was engaged in attacking the government's plan to limit the involvement of Chinese Huawei in the country's 5G rollout.<sup>87</sup> According to a study of the Twitter account of the Chinese Ambassador to the UK, 44% of the Ambassador's retweets and 20% of his replies came from the coordinated network of 62 accounts.<sup>88</sup>

## Foreign media

While China has invested massively into the apparatus telling the official "China's story", it has realised that indirect means may be more effective at targeting the desired audiences. This practice goes all the way back to the carefully presented image of the CCP to American journalist Edgar Snow, later published in 1937 in his influential book "Red Star Over China". Therefore, China has been apt at "propaganda outsourcing" or "borrowing a boat to go out on the ocean" (借船出海) by using foreign journalists, foreign

media and other entities to channel its narratives to the desired audience.<sup>89</sup>

This tactic has the benefit of making messaging appear as originating not from the Chinese state but from foreign outlets, rendering it more credible for the non-Chinese audience. This approach has had several manifestations, spanning from direct acquisition of foreign media to paid media inserts and content-sharing agreements with Chinese state media.

In the Czech Republic, for instance, the Chinese CEFC company invested in local media. Research on the coverage of invested media shows that their China coverage has turned exclusively positive, and they started to cover the China-led BRI project and the 17+1 initiative. Another case is that of the GB Times, a company set up in Finland and supported by CRI that purchased shares or engaged in content-sharing with radio stations across Europe, primarily airing cultural programming on China.<sup>90</sup>

Direct media acquisition in Europe has remained rare, however, and other ways of inserting Chinese messages have been more prevalent. The media insert "China Watch" produced by China Daily has been regularly published by The Telegraph, Le Figaro, Handelsblatt or El Pais.<sup>91</sup>

Chinese Xinhua agency has a content-sharing agreement with national media in Greece, Italy, Poland, Bulgaria or Albania.<sup>92</sup>

China has also been actively courting foreign media and individual journalists, including via various associations and cooperation mechanisms as well as media trainings.<sup>93</sup> Examples of China using European social media influencers have been noted in Poland, the UK and elsewhere.<sup>94</sup>

An interesting case has been cooperation with "alternative" media in the Czech Republic.<sup>95</sup> Since



at least October 2020, the Czech language version of the CRI website has published dozens of articles on China-related topics. These articles were often clearly following typical Chinese propaganda narratives, but cleverly adjusted them to resonate with the local audience, distinguishing themselves from the boilerplate translations usually published by CRI. The articles were later reposted<sup>96</sup> by a leading Czech “alternative” website AC24, known for carrying disinformation without indicating the source. Both sites carried the articles without a byline. However, the Chinese-language translations of the articles, posted by CRI, carried the name of the founder of the AC24 site. While the real author of the articles is not clear, indications point to some form of semi-official cooperation between CRI and the AC24 website. Several of the articles on the AC24 were also shared on Chinese Embassy’s social media accounts.

What China achieves in this way is the “localisation” of its narratives to host-country context, taking advantage of existing platforms to reach established audiences. The origin and nature of the content as propaganda of Chinese state-owned media is obscured. At the same time, Chinese state media can reuse the content for the domestic propaganda purposes, creating an image that China and its policies have support abroad and thus boosting its legitimacy.

## Foreign friends

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to China’s “united front work”<sup>97</sup> tactics designed to co-opt (not only) Western elites. While most of the “united front work” activities continue to target non-CCP entities and social forces within China itself, there has been a rapid growth of their manifestation abroad. Apart from seeking to influence policy decisions in foreign coun-

tries, these tactics have also sought to generate proxies for dissemination of Chinese narratives.

These “foreign friends”,<sup>98</sup> as termed by Chinese propaganda, are often self-interested individuals who align their interests with China for material or other benefits, but in the process also play a crucial role in spreading Chinese narratives and thus aiding its strategic goals. While they assist in promoting China’s image abroad, their status is also useful for domestic propaganda in China, manufacturing a picture of China that enjoys foreign support from supposedly respected figures.

At the political party level, the CCP’s International Liaison Department has created a network of partnerships, spanning parties without prejudice to ideology, as CCP proudly claims. However, far from only serving as a pragmatic conduit for sharing practices as the CCP claims, China has used inter-party cooperation to bolster its own legitimacy, gain support for its foreign policy goals and disseminate its strategic narratives,<sup>99</sup> as evidenced by a series of fora for political party cooperation held under the 17+1 format as well as the largest-scale gathering of the kind – the Dialogue with World Political Parties held in 2017.

Finally, European business representatives with extensive interests in China have vocally supported Chinese messaging when it suited their own goals. For example, the President of Siemens was on record that China’s BRI presents a “blueprint for the future of the global economy”.<sup>100</sup> Home Credit, a Czech retail banking company with extensive business presence in China, went as far as to try to influence the discourse on China in the Czech Republic when it hired a PR company, seeking to make the debate on China in the country more “rational”.<sup>101</sup>

# 4. RECEPTION: DOES CHINA SUCCEED?

The Chinese government has invested a great deal of effort in the formulation and spreading of its strategic narratives. But how successful have they been? In this section, we will begin by analysing polls that show overall negative – and worsening – public attitudes in NATO member states towards China. We will also discuss a few examples which may qualify as (partial) successes for China, namely the initial international responses to the Belt and Road Initiative and especially the (potential) domestic gains in China in terms of the CCP’s legitimacy.

## NATO publics are not buying into China’s story

Pew Research Center has long surveyed public attitudes around the world on a number of issues, including views of China. NATO member states consistently hold some of the least favourable views of China and the lowest confidence in the Chinese president internationally – together with Japan or India. In 2020, China’s image across NATO member states further deteriorated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which spread globally as a result of what most respondents considered to be poor handling of the pandemic by China’s authorities.<sup>102</sup>

Delving deeper into European attitudes towards China, we consulted our own Sinophone Borderlands survey,<sup>103</sup> which gathered data in 10 European NATO member states (UK, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary), and three non-NATO member states (Sweden, Serbia, and Russia) in September and October 2020 on representative national samples of 1,500 respondents. First, the survey confirms the overall picture that European NATO member states hold negative views of China and that this image has worsened recently according to respondents’ self-assessment (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).<sup>104</sup>

The survey also grants detailed insights into the factors that influence European perceptions of China. It was revealed that the most common association of China for the respondents was “COVID-19”. This has both positive and negative aspects, as China was perceived as providing a considerable amount of help during the pandemic, yet some respondents also believed that COVID-19 was manufactured and spread intentionally by China. In Poland, almost 50% of respondents believed this “anti-China” conspiracy, while much fewer people believed the “anti-American” conspiracy that it was the U.S. army who brought the virus to China (see Figure 3) – a theory suggested and spread also by Chinese diplomats.

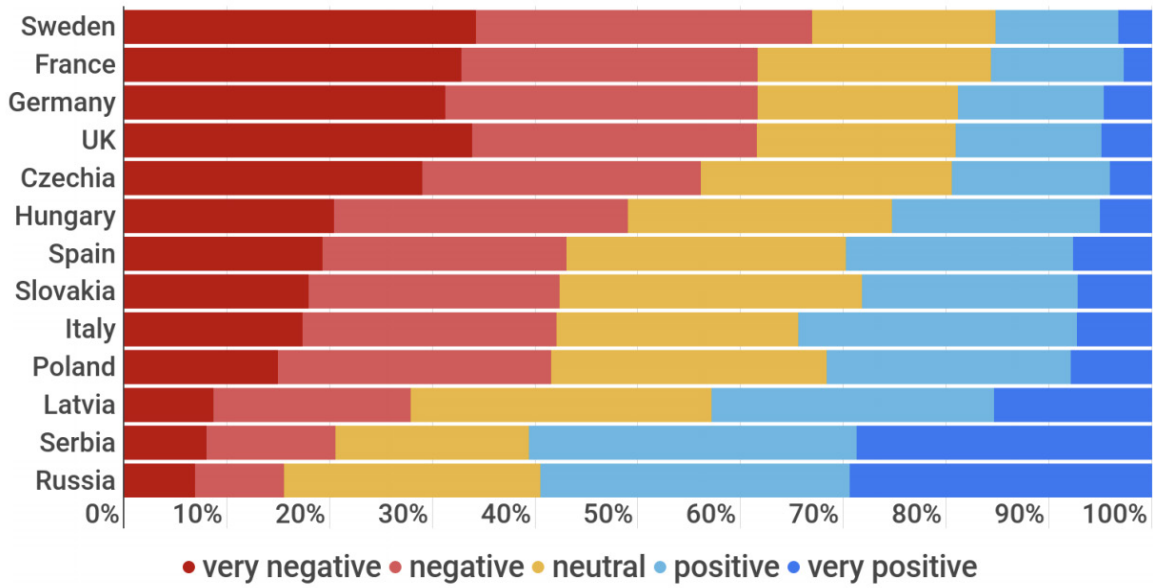


Figure 1: Feeling towards China among Europeans (% of respondents).  
 Source: Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey

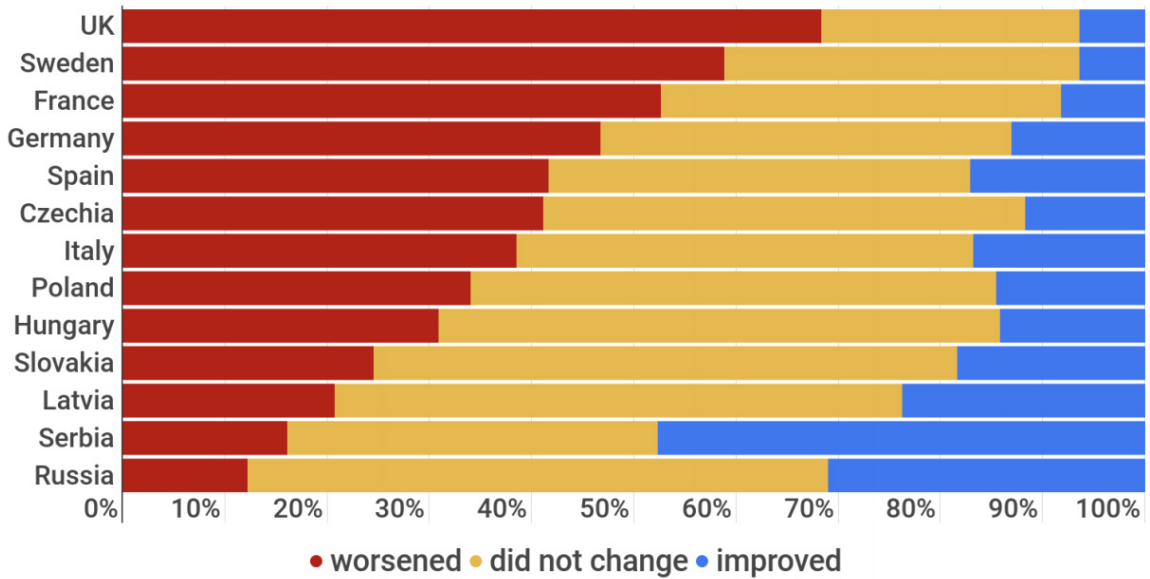


Figure 2: Change of feeling towards China among Europeans in the past three years (% of respondents)  
 Source: Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey<sup>105</sup>

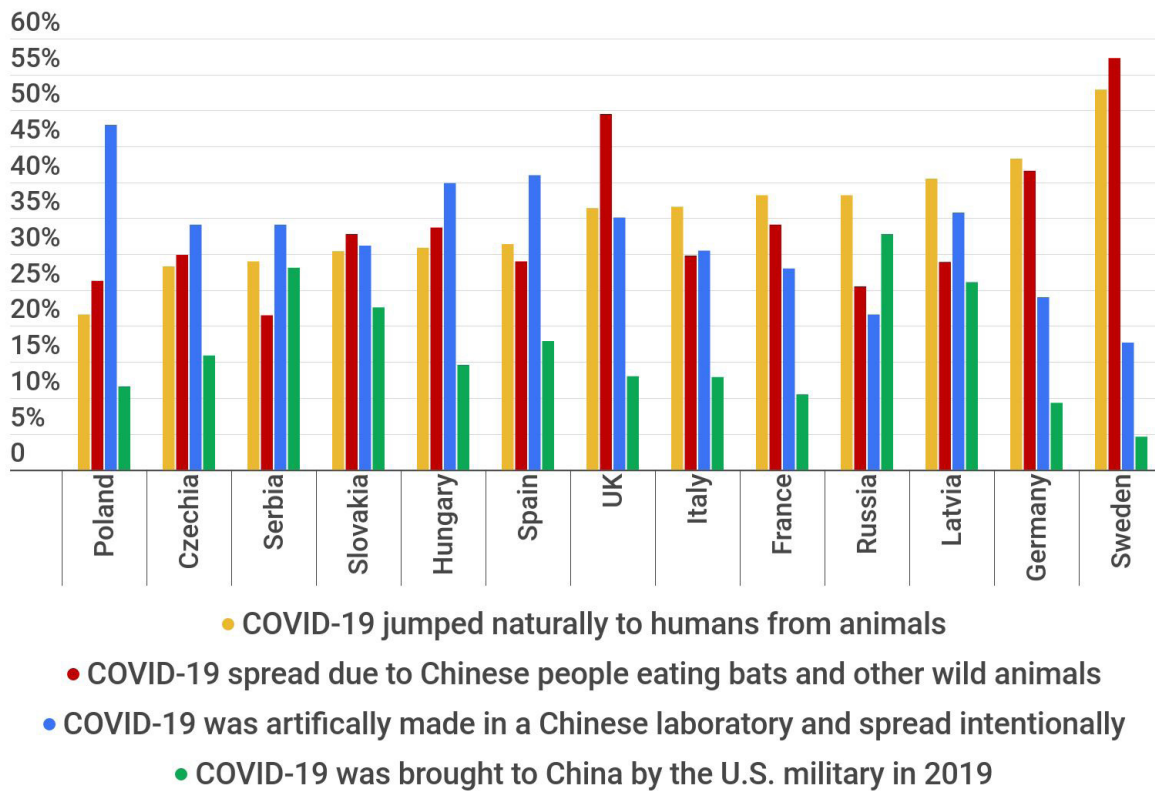


Figure 3: Do you agree with the following statements about the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic?  
 (% of respondents agreeing with the statements)  
 Source: Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey

Among other factors influencing how respondents form their views of China, largely negative perceptions of Chinese foreign policy and positive perceptions of Chinese cultural attractiveness have the most significant impact.

It might be tempting to say that Chinese public diplomacy and strategic narratives in Europe have all but failed. Such a conclusion, however, overlooks several important issues. While overall, China indeed did not succeed in “winning hearts and minds”, we can pinpoint a few instances where some success has been achieved.

First, in terms of COVID-19, despite inherent association as the epicentre of the pandemic, China has managed to persuade a sizable part of the European public that it has provided important help. This served as partial ‘damage control’, as respondents who recognised this help tended to have a more positive view of China. In Italy, for instance, which was the first European country to experience the COVID-19 crisis as well as Chinese “mask diplomacy”, more people recognised China’s help than the assistance of the EU (see Figure 4).

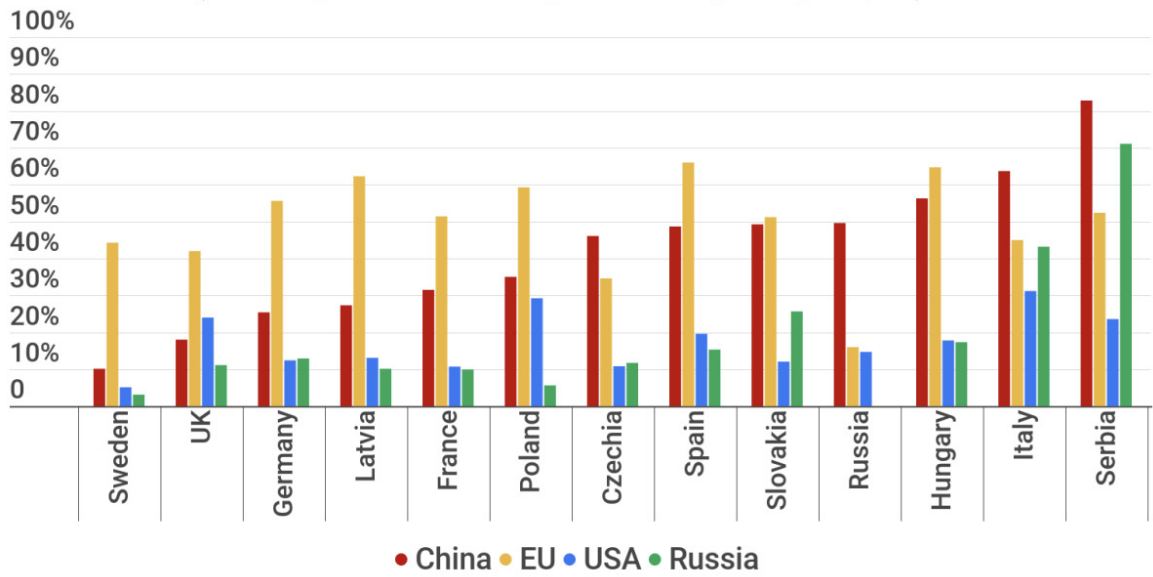


Figure 4: How much did the following countries help your country during COVID-19 pandemic? (% of respondents thinking the country/entity helped)  
Source: Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey

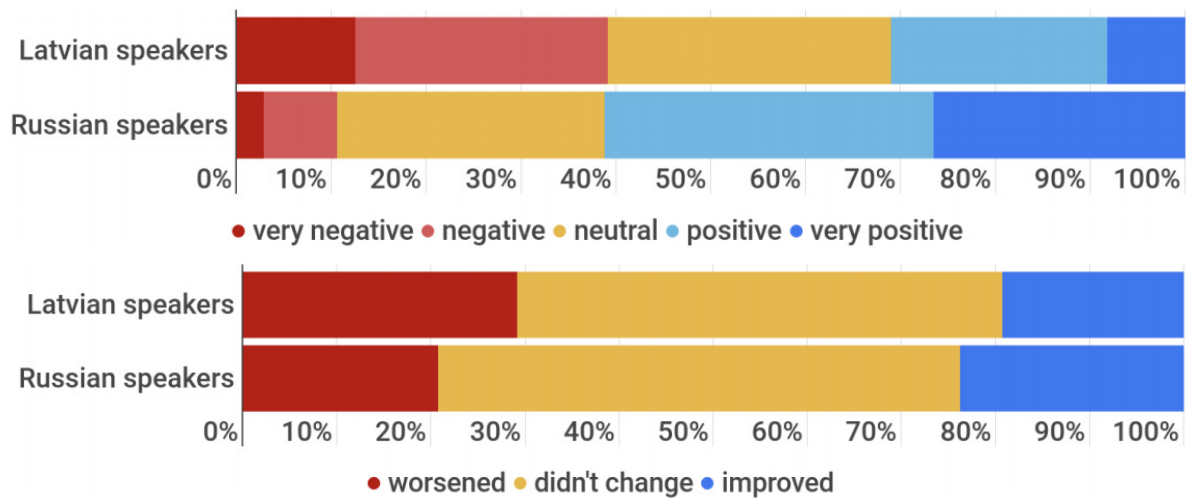


Figure 5: Feelings on China and change of feelings on China in the past three years  
Source: Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey

This has contributed to enhancing the overall image of China there which, according to the Pew Research Centre, did not worsen as much as in other European countries.

**Second, there are some segments of European societies that still see China positively.** Latvia is an interesting example here, as it is the only EU and NATO member among the surveyed countries where more respondents report positive than negative views of China. Latvians also report that their view of China got better over the previous three years (see Figures 1 and 2). One factor which can explain this are very significant differences in the attitudes between Latvian and Russian speakers, where Russian speakers hold far more positive views of China than Latvian speakers (see Figure 5). However, even Latvian speakers are relatively positive about China compared to the rest of surveyed countries, which can be explained by the still prevailing image of China being an economic opportunity.<sup>106</sup>

**Third, while representative polls are a meaningful barometer of public sentiments, they are not the only way to evaluate the success of Chinese strategic narratives.** In the following section, we will go back a few years to discuss how the BRI has been promoted by China and received in Europe, suggesting at least a partial (and temporary) success of Chinese discursive power. Subsequently, we will consider how the images of these international dynamics play out domestically in China – which remains the most important playground for the CCP.

## From the ‘Belt and Road’ to the ‘Wolf Warrior’

At present, it may be easy to forget that not long ago, many in Europe were full of hope and excitement about China. In 2013, newly installed Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Kazakhstan

and for the first time mentioned a vision that would later develop into the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). Instead of being a clearly devised infrastructure plan, the BRI can more accurately be understood as a massive PR campaign promoting cooperation with China in any area imaginable, ranging from trade and investment to culture, health, or technology – of course, in line with the preferences of the Chinese government, which has driven and controlled the entire process.<sup>107</sup>

Turcsanyi and Kachlikova<sup>108</sup> studied media coverage of the BRI in the UK, Poland, and Spain from the announcement of the initiative in 2013 until mid-2017. They have found that in all three countries, the media largely adopted Chinese narratives of the BRI, emphasising aspects of economic cooperation and overlooking potential geopolitical and security concerns. The authors suggested that the success of Chinese narratives in Europe stemmed, firstly, due to a lack of a clear European position, which meant that Chinese talking points met little coherent opposition. Secondly, Chinese narratives targeted some vulnerabilities, which made them “stick” with European audiences as they promised solutions to various problems from unemployment to infrastructure underdevelopment or support for tourism.

Steven Langendonk<sup>109</sup> focused on the Netherlands and studied how the media, business, and foreign policy circles dealt with the BRI narratives coming from China until about mid-2019. His results show that even though the Netherlands did not officially ‘join’ the BRI, it remained quite open to the initiative as another platform for economic exchange with China. Most visibly, the business community was found to be ‘co-opted’ and lured by the economic promises of the BRI, consciously separating economics and politics and even adopting Chinese narratives of ‘resurrection of the silk road’ and ‘win-win cooperation’.

At the level of the media and the foreign policy establishment, Chinese BRI narratives were not found to dominate, yet they were nevertheless recognised as a legitimate position, resulting in contested Dutch discourse and position on the BRI overall.

Van Noort and Colley<sup>110</sup> explored why Chinese BRI narratives were received differently in various countries. They argue that countries which recognised the economic benefits of the initiative and did not feel threatened, went on to accept it, citing Italy and Kazakhstan as examples. At the same time, countries where only one of these conditions was met (i.e. they either did not recognise material benefits or felt threatened by it) resulted in moderate contestation of the initiative, citing the Netherlands, the UK, or Mexico as examples.

Hence, at least for some time, Chinese strategic narratives did achieve some success in Europe. Yet, as shown in recent polls, European public sentiments vis-à-vis China have become decisively more negative since 2017. What has driven this negative shift in European perceptions of China?

First, much of China's positive image in Europe ever since its opening up in late 1970s has been linked to the perception of economic opportunities and material benefits to be generated from engagement with China. These optimistic European perceptions, however, were often proven exaggerated. A few years after the announcement of the BRI, the mood started to shift again as the initiative was not seen to deliver on expectations. This feeling further exacerbated previously existing frustration with Chinese protectionism, unfair support for own companies, and generally a perceptions of the lack of 'level playing field'.<sup>111</sup>

Second, political developments in China have at times derailed prospective economic cooperation.<sup>112</sup> The recent escalations of the situation in

Xinjiang and Hong Kong, among other news of worsening human rights situation in China, have become key topics in public discussion about China in Europe, significantly damaging the image of China and rendering even economic exchanges more questionable and problematic.

Third, China's relations with the US started to rapidly worsen after Donald Trump became President, to the extent that numerous observers questioned whether a new Cold War was imminent.<sup>113</sup> Although Europe had its reservations about Trump, as a traditional ally of the US, it has been naturally influenced by rapidly worsening of the US-China relations. As such, the US-driven reconsideration of the long-standing "engagement" paradigm in dealing with China, coupled with European homegrown concerns, have led to shifts in the perception of China.

Fourth, Chinese diplomacy has responded to these developments harshly with the "wolf warrior" approach. It is not surprising that the countries where Chinese diplomats engaged in more public confrontations belong to those having the most negative public attitudes towards China – such as the UK, France, Germany, or the Czech Republic.<sup>114</sup>

## Domestic context of Chinese strategic narratives

The question is why Chinese diplomacy has acted in a way, which arguably undermines the image of China abroad. Did China abandon the ambition of winning over societies in Europe? This again serves to highlight the importance of the domestic context: even though the Chinese government cares about its international image, it does not come even close to the attention it pays to the image among domestic audiences. Moreover, the Chinese government is especially sensitive about the nationalists and worried about being

criticised by them as “weak”, especially in dealing with the Western countries.<sup>115</sup> At the same time, many Chinese officials themselves hold nationalistic sentiments, often going hand in hand with anti-Western feelings related to the history of so-called “century of humiliation”.

Xi Jinping’s overall political approach has strengthened this line of thinking – and his foreign minister Wang Yi and the top diplomat Yang Jiechi have quickly come on board. In this domestic political context, many Chinese diplomats have decided to take up the “fighting spirit”, as requested by their leaders, either to boost their careers or stemming from their own conviction. Following several promotions of the most vocal diplomats, the signal seemed to be clear for the whole ministry that this was the preferred mode of conduct.<sup>116</sup>

There is some evidence that the Chinese government enjoys public support and may have been even rewarded domestically for its provocative international posture during the COVID-19 pandemic (although the authoritarian system in China makes it impossible to know with certainty). It was found previously that the Chinese public perceives disputes with foreign countries through the frame of “national humiliation” independent from the media reporting,<sup>117</sup> and that respondents do not approve of China backing down in a crisis scenario against the US military threat, although they are willing to back down under other conditions.<sup>118</sup>

Carry Wu, a sociologist at York University, found that across a sample of almost twenty thousand Chinese respondents in late April 2020, satisfaction with all five levels of government in China since the outbreak of COVID-19 increased, with the central level enjoying the highest level of public approval at a staggering 98%.<sup>119</sup> This is consistent with other independent surveys showing very high levels of public satisfaction in China.<sup>120</sup>

In another survey in January-February 2021, it was found that among 14 developed countries, Chinese respondents hold the least favourable

views of the US (72 %), followed by Japan (58%), Australia (54%), Canada (46%), and the UK (45%). European countries are perceived much more favourably, with Germany on the top (69% having favourable views), followed by Spain, Belgium, France, and Italy.<sup>121</sup>

In January 2021, YouGov<sup>122</sup> published a survey in which it asked respondents in various countries what difference would a COVID-19 vaccine’s origin make to people’s perceptions of it. From among the respondents in 12 countries who were asked about 17 potential vaccines, the Chinese respondents proved to be most confident in their domestic product with the overall net difference being 83% (compared to second Indians at 68% and third Singaporeans at 61% net confidence in their national vaccine). In other words, more than four out of five Chinese respondents trust Chinese vaccines more than the vaccines produced in other countries. This is remarkable as for a long time, Chinese consumers used to favour foreign products – especially Western ones – for their supposedly higher quality.

These findings show that the recent trend ongoing in China might have been further accelerated by COVID-19. As Huang Haifeng, political scientist at the University of California, put it: the Chinese people’s perceptions of China vs West made a U-turn from “the moon is rounder abroad” to “bravo, my country”.<sup>123</sup> In other words, while in the past, the Chinese exaggerated the quality of life in Western countries and were relatively more critical of their own country, in recent years they have turned to exaggerate China’s power and are willing to uncritically defend any aspect of the Chinese state and its policies.

If these indications are accurate – and, again, they should be taken with a pinch of salt due to the closed nature of China’s political system – they may suggest that the Chinese government’s gamble of exchanging good image abroad for the high trust at home has paid off, at least for the time being.



# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Significant efforts notwithstanding, China's ability to persuade the publics of NATO member states with its narratives remains limited. As we have discussed, this to a large extent derives from the contradictions between domestic and international contexts, when Chinese diplomats prioritise domestic audiences, which increasingly demand strong and uncompromising positions protecting China's interests and image. Unsurprisingly, the Western audience is put off by this often aggressive posturing of China.

However, we should not underestimate the ability of China to "muddy the waters"<sup>124</sup> and to win over some important actors – individual politicians, businesses, media, and others who could seek to instrumentalise China in the pursuit of their own agenda. Chinese strategic narratives already represent ready-made alternatives for those looking for "emancipation" from the mainstream liberal democratic order – or simply seeking to benefit materially or otherwise from China's offers. At the end of the day, foreign elites might be even more important as the target audience for China than the general public.

At the member state level, China could also seek to win over individual member states. This can potentially lead to divisions within the Alliance, especially when they push for China's interest which may be against the Alliance's interest. Given that NATO's decision-making is based on members' consensus, divisions within the Alliance can hamper the effectiveness and credibility of NATO. There could be instances where

some individual member states are more susceptible to Chinese influence due to their national concerns. Other member states should work together to address those concerns, to reduce China's influence on those member states.

The attractiveness of Chinese narratives will in a large part depend on the success of NATO in creating a positive vision of the future and offering incentives for various actors to participate in its realisation. Competently addressing socio-economic issues in individual NATO member states and establishing a firm basis for long-term economic prosperity and social stability will be a necessary precondition for limiting the effectiveness of Chinese outreach. Importantly, while China's narratives may fall on deaf ears in NATO member states, the example of "standing up" to the dominant West and following own development models may be attractive for many other countries, especially non-Western developing nations.

Therefore, NATO member states should present a positive attractive alternative to countries potentially susceptible to Chinese influence. This entails stepping up efforts across different domains, from providing a viable competitor to Beijing's infrastructure investment offers, to ensuring COVID-19 vaccine deliveries across the developing world. Perhaps most importantly, NATO needs to persuade others that it cares about their well-being – or at least that the interests of non-NATO member states are complementary with the interests of the alliance.

This should underpin a positive vision for the consolidation and reinforcement of a liberal world order governed by democratic norms and respect for human rights. In fact, China has been one of the main beneficiaries of this very system for decades.

Finally, there is a need to address some of the offensive features of Chinese strategic narratives, including China's efforts to silence criticism of 'sensitive' issues, the spread of disinformation, limiting the scope of NATO member states' autonomy in foreign policy, or the efforts to relativise global

norms and values on human rights and other core concepts. Even though China may not explicitly try to export its political model abroad, its growing attempts to shape public discussions, governance processes and outcomes around the world have the potential to damage the resilience of liberal democracies and their international interests.<sup>125</sup> Vigorous support for independent journalism, civil society activism and creating a foundation for an independent knowledge-creation and sharing on China-related issues will be essential.

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