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Chinese Media Reactions to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and NATO Expansion in Sweden and Finland

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Chinese political and media narratives surrounding the Russo-Ukrainian war have remained largely consistent over the first year and a half of Russia's most recent invasion of Ukraine, and, for the most part, have paralleled Russia's own media frames and political narratives. Chinese state media and Foreign Ministry representatives have consistently amplified Russian propaganda, often citing Kremlin officials and Russian-controlled media as their news sources, or have shared those stories through state or state-controlled social media outlets. This is clear in Chinese treatments of Russian human rights violations, discussion of the war's origins, and the spread of Russian disinformation concerning the presence of Nazis in Ukraine and American bioweapon labs in that country.¹

While China's mirroring of those messages is obvious and well documented, its interests go beyond support for Russia or local concerns in Ukraine. China's narratives primarily relate to its broader security concerns and balance of power calculations.² With respect to NATO, China's interests happen to coincide with Russia's. This has resulted in messaging designed to delegitimize and denigrate the alliance by supporting the Russian assertion that the West is both responsible for the war and is seeking to spread violence and instability to Asia. Through its support for Russian messaging, China also seeks to delegitimize the use of sanctions and multilateral responses outside of the UN framework – where it enjoys influence and a veto. At the heart of these efforts is a focus on its own vulnerabilities and the potential threats to China's own economy.

In the Arctic information environment, Chinese messaging surrounding Sweden and Finland's application for NATO membership fall into Beijing's broader NATO narratives. Here, the alliance expansion is described in Chinese media (both English and Chinese language) as destabilizing, an example of American imperialism, and likely to backfire. Again, China's interests in the region extend well beyond the Arctic, with Sweden and Finland looked upon as damaging precedents of alliance expansion that Beijing worries may extend to its own backyard.

Chinese Messaging on NATO Generally

NATO Expansion is to Blame for the War

One of the most consistent narratives in Chinese political narratives regarding the war in Ukraine has been to blame the conflict on NATO expansion. This theme is widespread in Chinese-language media, with language that closely mirrors Chinese government statements on the subject. For its part, the Chinese government has closely hewn to Russia's established position, which holds that NATO's expansion upset the balance of power in Europe and forced a Russian response.

In an April 2022 press conference, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian offered a concise overview of the government's messaging:

The Russia-Ukraine conflict, to a large extent, is the result of Western arrogance and successive mistakes over the last 30-plus years and NATO's eastward expansion is the root cause of the ongoing conflict ... As the world's people can see, instead of bringing about peace, NATO's expansion has led to seriously damaged mutual trust and regional turmoil and tensions to the extent that the situation is spiraling out of control.³

In response to a leading question from a Chinese journalist about Western blame, Zhao continued:

As the largest military alliance born out of the Cold War, NATO has long adhered to the obsolete security concept, engaged in bloc confrontation according to the playbook of the old Cold War and reduced itself to some country's [America] tool for hegemony. While claiming to be a defensive organization, NATO has been constantly making trouble and creating confrontation in reality. While asking other countries to abide by the basic norms governing international relations, NATO has grossly waged wars against sovereign countries and fired shells indiscriminately that led to civilian deaths and displacement.⁴

This overarching narrative approach to the war has governed Chinese government statements and has been consistently echoed by Chinese media. Chinese language reporting is generally explicit and unnuanced in its assessment. The *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, wrote (falsely) that "international public opinion generally believes that the root cause of the outbreak of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is the continuous expansion of NATO led by the United States after the



Figure 1: Global Times (February 27, 2022)

end of the Cold War, ignoring Russia's legitimate concerns on security issues, long-term siege and squeeze Russia's security space, repeatedly challenging Russia's strategic "red line."⁵ *Xinhua*, the official state press agency of the People's Republic of China, offers a similar assessment: "is the unrestricted eastward expansion of NATO led by the United States that is pushing the Russia-Ukraine conflict to the crater step by step"⁶ *China Central Television* (CCTV), a Chinese state-owned broadcaster controlled by the Chinese Communist Party offers an identical assessment: "many analysts believe that the root cause of the Ukraine crisis lies in the continuous expansion of NATO led by the United States and its continuous approach to Russia's border, which ultimately affects Russia's fundamental security interests."⁷ These statements are representative of China's broader domestic messaging, which sees little variation and hews closely to the party line.

Close relationships between Chinese and Russian state media organizations have also allowed for direct Russian messaging within China. For instance, a May 4, 2022 article from *Russia Today*, the official Chinese language account of the Beijing Branch of RT International, cites Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian's tweet of two NATO maps from 1990 and 2019, mocking former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker's [deliberately misunderstood] pledge not to expand NATO eastward. The article also mentions Zhao's previous statements that NATO's actions under the US leadership have "driven the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and that instead of contributing to the solution, Washington continues to add fuel to the fire."⁸

China's English-language media is less aggressive in its anti-NATO pronouncements, and typically presents more fact-based stories, which are often shorter pieces with minimal analysis. These stories are more subtle, but consistently present NATO in a negative light. Here, NATO is not commonly accused of starting the war, as it is in Chinese language media, however it is never described as a defensive alliance, or reacting to Russian aggression. There is also a clear emphasis in these stories on NATO disunity – often focusing on Turkey's threats to veto Swedish and (initially) Finnish membership in the alliance.

To push more aggressive anti-NATO messaging, Chinese English-language media often relies on editorials, frequently written by Westerners. This provides the illusion of balance and reliability as the criticism is seen to be coming from 'experts' outside of China. A good example is a piece in *China Daily*, an English-language paper owned by the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party. In an article entitled "Ukraine crisis puts Europe's autonomy at stake," Ulf Sandmark of the German-based Schiller Institute writes that "NATO's expansion in Northern Europe stems from the United States' policy of global hegemony, which has been destabilizing the world and pushing it toward another world war."⁹ Sandmark is the Chairman of the Belt & Road Initiative Executive Group in Sweden and has a history of working with the Chinese Embassy in Stockholm and Swedish Chinese cultural centres.¹⁰



Figure 2: Global Times, Twitter

Alliance Threats to China

China's hostility to NATO goes beyond a desire to support Russia's propaganda. In recent years, NATO has begun to focus on the growing threat from China. The 2021 NATO Brussels Summit Communiqué made it clear that "China's growing influence and international policies can present challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance." This concern stemmed from NATO's acceptance that "China's stated ambitions and assertive behaviour present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order."¹¹ NATO's *Strategic Concept 2030* also introduced China as an adversary whose "coercive policies" will have to be addressed by NATO.¹²

China also sees NATO as a template that it does not want replicated closer to home.¹³ In particular, China sees the emergence of new coalitions designed to counter its growing military power as a serious threat. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has evolved to become a tighter cooperative grouping and has been denounced by Beijing as an "Asian NATO."¹⁴ The AUKUS trilateral pact is also seen by Beijing as the foundation for broader alliance cooperation directed at containing and countering its power and influence. The development of more formalized regional alliances or partnerships amid its enemies is naturally a significant concern for China and its narratives on NATO in Europe reflect that.

In his April 11, 2022 press conference on the Ukraine War, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian told reporters that NATO was a military organization in the North Atlantic that is travelling to the Asia-Pacific "to flex its muscles and provoke tensions." Far from a defensive organization,

NATO has been transgressing regions and fields and clamoring for a new Cold War of bloc confrontation. This gives ample reason for high vigilance and firm opposition from the international community ... NATO has disrupted Europe. It should stop trying to destabilize Asia and the whole world."¹⁵

Deputy foreign minister Le Yucheng told a gathering at Tsinghua University that the war and NATO enlargement represent "a mirror for observing American alliance-building in Asia and the Pacific, a trend which if unchecked would push the region "into a pit of fire."¹⁶

This fear that NATO will expand into Asia is a consistent theme and is seen again in a May 2022 call between the Greek Foreign Minister and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Here, Wang made it clear that his country remains "opposed to some forces using the Ukraine crisis as an excuse to justify NATO's further expansion into the Asia-Pacific region." "The attempt to build an Asia-Pacific version of NATO," according to Wang, "will only do serious harm to regional security."¹⁷

These concerns and comparisons have filtered into Chinese commentary and media. Xu Bu and Chen Wenbing, President of the China Institute of International Studies; Contributing Researcher of the Xi Jinping Center for the Study of Diplomatic Thought, illustrate this thinking well, writing that the US:

... has concocted the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” to disturb the situation in the Asia-Pacific region. In February this year, the Biden administration released a new version of the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” and Secretary of State Blinken went to the Indo-Pacific region with a lot of activities. This shows that even in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the U.S. has not given up the plot to push up tensions in the Indo-Pacific and stir up the situation in the Asia-Pacific region. The essence of the “Indo-Pacific strategy” is that the U.S. is gathering its “allies” and “partners” in the Indo-Pacific to jointly respond to the so-called “China threat” the “Indo-Pacific strategy” is essentially the United States gathering its “allies” and “partners” in the Indo-Pacific to jointly address the so-called “Chinese threat.”¹⁸

Europe Suffers and is Controlled by the US

China’s messaging towards Europe, vis-à-vis NATO, mimics Russia’s traditional narratives by focusing on the dangers to Europe of being entangled in America’s security web. The concept of NATO is often used interchangeably with the United States, which fits with China’s assertion that the alliance is an extension of US national security policy, in which European allies enjoy little if any independent agency. Han Liqun, of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) (a think-tank), illustrates this approach very clearly: “whether it is Ukraine, Germany, France, or the whole NATO, they are all tools for the US to preserve the security of the system. The US push for NATO’s eastward expansion, ignoring Russia’s security concerns, and using Ukraine as “cannon fodder” are all the result of systemic considerations, rather than purely about protecting Europe or containing Russia.”¹⁹

Sun Chenghao, a Research Associate at the Center for International Security, Tsinghua University, as well as a frequent contributor to CGTN and the *Global Times* demonstrates the Chinese view of Europe as falling between two stools. She writes that the crisis proved that the European concept of a Sino-US “middle way” is failing:

Europe had hoped to stay ideologically aligned with the United States, cooperate in the economic and trade fields with China, and temporarily rely on the United States for security while seeking to increase its independent power development. The Russia-Ukraine crisis has dealt a huge blow to this design, and Europe has become the main battleground of the conflict between the West and Russia, exposing Europe’s shortcomings in economy and security.²⁰

This narrative is common in Chinese-language media. *Xinhua* tells its readers that:

The divergent interests of the US and Europe are difficult to resolve, and most developing countries refuse to impose sanctions on Russia. In the process of escalating the crisis in Ukraine, the United States is sacrificing the interests of Europe and maintaining its hegemony. This unequal relationship determines that the current mutual embrace is only an ‘emergency solidarity’ stimulated by the crisis, which is destined to be unsustainable.²¹

Representative of *Global Times* reporting is the assertion that “within NATO, Germany, France, and other EU countries do not share the interests of the United States ... If sanctions against Russia continue, most European countries will face the pressure of inflation and livelihood, and the resulting social crisis will eventually have to pay for Europe itself.”²²

The Ukrainian war is also seen as a tool to expand American control over its European client states. Wang Yuting, a contributing researcher of the Research Center of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and an associate researcher of the Institute of Chinese Frontier Studies writes that the “Russian-Ukrainian conflict is a tragedy for both Ukraine and Europe, behind which is the geopolitical conspiracy of the U.S.-led NATO ... The United States continues to provide many advanced weapons for Ukraine, so that Russia and Ukraine consume each other, to coalesce NATO member states and strengthen their control over Europe.”²³



Figure 3: *Global Times* (May 23, 2022)

This messaging is consistent with Russian media analysis, which highlights the subservience of America’s European partners, and the damage done to European economies from Western sanctions placed on Russia.

Chinese Messaging in Sweden and Finland

The Official Reaction

China’s government reaction to Finland and Sweden’s decision to apply for NATO membership has been generally muted. In what was likely a purposefully ambiguous statement, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian noted that Finland’s application to join NATO will “naturally add new factors to the bilateral relations” and encouraged the country to “follow the principle of security indivisibility.”²⁴

Chinese diplomatic representatives have also been relatively silent. Ambassador Cui Aimin, in Sweden, has maintained media silence on the issue and the embassy has not sought to conduct any concerted information operations in the open space. Official media releases ignore the question and, over the first year of the war, the embassy’s twitter feed had only a single retweet on the issue: a *China Daily* article aggressively echoing Russian messaging about NATO’s blame for the war in Ukraine.²⁵ Historically, the embassy has been a source of Chinese vitriol against Swedish government decisions perceived as harmful to Chinese interests. However, former Ambassador Gui Congyou – who adopted an aggressive ‘wolf-warrior’ approach – was replaced by Cui in late December 2021, indicating the importance of the individual diplomat in the narrative.

The Chinese embassy in Finland has also not engaged on the issue of NATO membership. Statements, when made, have been circumspect. The Embassy's one 'News' post on the subject during the first year of war relates to Foreign Minister Wang Yi's September 2022 meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. This article highlighted China's general concern with NATO's ability to "see China in a reasonable and correct way" and NATO's military "bloc" approach.²⁶ Both of these are standard Chinese narratives and not specific to Finland.

In December 2022, Chinese Ambassador to Finland Wang Tongqing gave an interview with the Daily Finland and NATO was not mentioned. Wang did recite standard lines surrounding general distain for NATO, including the idea that "China upholds true multilateralism," and that "countries should not fall into the traps of bloc confrontation or zero-sum game, which benefit no one."²⁷ However, the fact that the alliance is not a topic of conversation indicates that the embassy is not playing a role in any attempts to openly influence Finland.

State Media

The reaction of Chinese state-media has been predictable, tracking existing messages surrounding NATO and the European-American partnership. The Swedish-Finnish application has not been the focus of Chinese-language media. The attention that is paid, however, clearly applies existing Chinese narratives surrounding NATO. For instance, the People's Daily warns that "the entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO has a great impact on international security ... NATO has repeatedly expanded eastward, making the trust relationship between European countries and Russia extremely fragile."²⁸ The dangers of an Arctic NATO expansion were also fit into the existing NATO-threat model in an interview with Professor Jin Yinan, the former director of the Strategic Research Institute of the Department of Strategic Education and Research of the National Defence University and representative of the PLA National Congress of Heroes and Models. Jin notes that this expansion represents "Global 'NATOization'" which is "the root of disaster."²⁹ He goes on to say:

Russia will definitely respond vigorously, and thus lay the hidden danger of creating huge conflicts ... NATO's proactive expansion of membership is a major source of European insecurity ... At this time, the expansion of the military alliance with NATO as the core will inevitably bring disasters, wars and conflicts to the European region and even the whole world. We can imagine that if NATO extends its expansion tentacles to Asia, and if one day Japan and South Korea also join NATO, then NATO will lead regional conflicts from Europe to Asia. As a military organization, NATO, wherever it goes, wars, conflicts, and confrontations follow, and wherever it goes, it brings disaster.³⁰

This response encapsulates all the key NATO themes, applied to Sweden and Finland. Their inclusion is part of a global effort by the US to expand its influence, which will force Russia (and others) to respond, thus bringing destruction to Europe and America's other supposed partners.

While sparse attention is paid to Sweden and Finland in Chinese-language media, Beijing's English-language media has paid attention to the Nordic countries' applications. The main English-language publications: China Daily, Xinhua, and People's Daily have run dozens of stories on the subject. Most of these have been fact-based,

often short, stories summarizing events. The emphasis, however, remains negative. No positive analysis is offered and the decision to join NATO is never presented as a legitimate, defensive reaction to Russian aggression.

The choice of quotations within these fact-based stories demonstrates a key tactic used by Chinese English-language media to convey a message without assuming responsibility for conveying it. This entails highlighting negative, local opinions to create the illusion that a policy is more controversial, or faces greater opposition, than it really does. In so doing, Chinese media is not lying, but rather placing selective focus on voices that echo Beijing's preferred messaging. With respect to Finland and Sweden, this is a very common approach, found throughout state media.

Chinese-language media employs many of the same tactics, employing selective quotations, from seemingly reputable sources, to focus a reader on a desired message. A good example is an April 2022 fact-based article by the *Beijing Daily Client* detailing the Finnish application to NATO. While factually accurate, it spends much of its attention highlighting the “different voices” within the Finland and Sweden. Citing a report from *Russia Today*, the Chinese paper notes that Sweden's opposition Left Party does not support membership, quoting its leader Dade Gostal's proposal for a referendum on the subject and Swedish Prime Minister Andersson's refusal.³¹ From Finland, the piece quotes Finnish Left Alliance MP Merja Kyllönen, who said:

if we apply for NATO membership, will all 30 NATO members want to jointly guard the 1,340-kilometer border between Finland and Russia? Or would we still have to rely on ourselves, while possibly taking on the responsibility of protecting other member states? In other words, we are still on our own, and may also be responsible for protecting other member states.³²

In support of that assessment, the article also quotes a Dr. Rochalainen (described as a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Finland), who advocated for the continuation of the country's policy of military non-alignment. Tellingly, Dr. Rochalainen has been difficult to identify, while the Communist Party of Finland dissolved in 1992.

Along these same lines, in April 2022, *Xinhua* quoted senior Serbian diplomat Živadin Jovanović to support its assertion that NATO's eastward expansion was the main cause of the war and still a threat to global peace and cooperation. That same article also referenced Italy's former Deputy Minister of Economic Development, Michele Geraci, who provided an interview to *Xinhua* where he made the same assertion as Jovanović, adding



Figure 4: CGTN (May 18, 2022)

that the cost of the conflict is mainly borne by Europe. In Hungary, University Eurasia Center Research Director Mordez Jobau pointed out that the problem of Ukraine should be resolved through negotiations, not Western military support.³³

The week of the invasion, the *People's Daily*, cited former UN Under-Secretary-General Alaki as saying that “the root cause of the crisis in Ukraine is the continuous expansion of NATO, which is a problem that has lasted for more than 30 years.”³⁴ *China Daily* printed comments supporting similar conclusions from Agnes Hellstrom, chairwoman of the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society and Swedish Social Democratic Youth Union chairwoman Lisa Nabo.³⁵

Global Times even supported its implied hostility to Swedish and Finnish membership by citing former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, who warned that if Sweden and Finland join NATO, Russia will deploy large numbers of troops along its northwest border. He added that deploying nuclear weapons in the region would also be a way to “restore the balance.”³⁶ These ‘fact-based’ stories push the same anti-NATO messaging by implication or omission, with the preferred tactic being the use of highly select, often fringe voices, imitating genuine debate.

The news agencies’ opinion pages offer a more overt criticism. As is often the case in Chinese media analysis of NATO, these criticisms are often brought forward by foreign ‘experts’ of dubious or no credentials. In April 2022, for instance, CGTN published an opinion piece (later picked up by *China Daily*) entitled “Admitting Finland and Sweden into NATO would worsen European security.” This was authored by Andrew Korybko, a pro-Putin Moscow-based American political analyst. Predictably, Korybko writes that “this anti-Russian bloc will therefore worsen European security by risking a replication of the Ukrainian scenario.”³⁷

CGTN also ran an opinion piece from Christopher Helali, the international secretary of the American Communist Party, who writes:

... this latest NATO expansion will only be seen as an escalation of an already existential national security threat for Russia. This security threat can be understood by looking at the map of Eastern Europe and plotting NATO's expansion ... While politicians and citizens in Finland and Sweden plan the next steps to formally join NATO, Russia continues diplomatic means to ensure NATO expansion doesn't occur. Talk about peace is NATO doublespeak. NATO expansion imperils Europe and the world now more than ever before.³⁸

These and other foreign ‘experts’ offer messages that align with Chinese state and state-media narratives but can be presented in a more forceful manner, giving the Chinese government some degree of distance. Opinion pieces are the authors’ own views and *China Daily*, for instance, ran a lengthy attack on the Swedish/Finnish application by Ulf Sandmark with the notice that his “views don’t necessarily reflect those of *China Daily*.”³⁹

The Arctic More Broadly

The main theme of Chinese messaging on Sweden and Finland relates to NATO broadly and European security more specifically. However, there are references to the impact on China's Arctic interests as well. These two Nordic states are some of China's most important economic connections in the region and their joining NATO would likely change that relationship. Alliance membership would "contribute to the further militarization of the Arctic region," according to *China Daily*, and complicate shipping interests there. That would be prove detrimental for not only Russia but China as well.⁴⁰ Citing Russian Foreign Ministry Ambassador at Large for the Arctic Cooperation Nikolay Korchunov, *China Daily* sought to convey the message that "the internationalization of the alliance's military activities in high latitudes, in which non-Arctic NATO states are involved, can't fail to cause concern ... if Sweden and Finland joined NATO it would jeopardize security and trust in the Arctic region."⁴¹

China has traditionally feared exclusion from Arctic governance mechanisms and, in recent years, has seen its investments in the Arctic region blocked by local security concerns. The integration of Finland and Sweden into NATO will certainly compound these concerns by tying their security interests closer to those of the US and the rest of Europe. That is likely to lead to more thorough vetting of foreign direct investment, the blocking of Chinese dual-use scientific work or facilities, and the exclusion of Chinese firms from strategic sectors of the Nordic economies.

There is also concern in some Chinese media that the development of the Arctic will be hindered by the war. Sanctions, in particular, will impact Chinese cooperation in Russian resource projects causing what Wang Chenguang (a researcher at the Guoguan think tank) described as "setbacks in Russia's Arctic economic development."⁴² Since the invasion, such setbacks have become clear. In May 2022, for instance, China stopped work on a module for Russia's major LNG 2 project – delaying what the Russians consider one of their most important resource projects.⁴³

Themes

China's NATO focused narratives can be divided up into several readily identifiable themes. These themes draw heavily from (and reinforce) Russian messaging, but also have direct relevance to China's own perceived national interests.

The United Nations

A need to increase global reliance on the United Nations for dispute resolution is a common theme running through Chinese political and media messaging vis-à-vis the war and NATO. This position has been clearly laid out on several occasions. On February 25, 2022, for instance, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi told former British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss that:

The Chinese side believes that the UN Security Council should play a constructive role in solving the Ukraine issue, and should focus on regional peace and stability and the general security of all countries. Actions taken by the Security Council should cool tensions rather than fuel them, and

should facilitate a diplomatic solution rather than further escalation. In view of this, China has always disapproved of Security Council resolutions that frequently invoke Chapter VII, which authorizes the use of force and sanctions.⁴⁴

Chinese Ambassador to Russia, Zhang Hanhui, repeated this position in an interview with RT, harmonizing his government's position on the subject with Moscow:

China and Russia jointly safeguard the international system with the United Nations at its core and the international order based on international law. The heads of state have repeatedly issued political documents on the international situation, strategic stability, and major hotspot issues opposing the rules-based international order, opposing hegemonic bullying and unilateralism, resolutely resisting unilateral sanctions, and supporting the United Nations as a central platform for all countries to jointly maintain universal security, share the fruits of development and jointly control the world's destiny.⁴⁵

This position is supported in many Chinese media commentaries, and well laid out in a lengthy article in the Community Party paper, the *Guangming Daily* by Xu Bu and Chen Wenbing, presidents of the China Institute of International Studies and special research fellows of the Xi Jinping Center for Diplomatic Thought. Xu and Chen recount that the United States invaded Iraq (and other states) without a Security Council resolution, which “shows that hegemonism and power politics are the most destructive forces for world peace ... We must be vigilant against the actions of a few countries to replace the purposes and principles of the UN Charter with the so-called “rules-based international order,” and firmly safeguard the authoritative status and core role of the UN in international affairs.”⁴⁶

China supports resolving conflicts through the UN in large measure because of Beijing's veto on the Security Council. Western interventions reliant on the UN's approval are de facto reliant on China. Operating outside of this system is frequently referred to as “hegemonic bullying” – or some variation therein. Apart from military interventionism, reference to the UN is also meant to delegitimise and attack Western sanctions against Russia, but also the legitimacy of sanctions more generally. Indeed, this theme is extremely common in Chinese government and matching media narratives.

China's official position on this is clear. Chinese Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui noted that China “resolutely resist[s] unilateral sanctions, and support[s] the United Nations.”⁴⁷ While China has been willing to sanction nations through the UN, doing so outside the UN framework is seen as a threatening precedent.

Liu Huaqin, a researcher at the Institute of International Trade and Economic Cooperation in the Ministry of Commerce, writes that:

... the U.S.-led Western countries' use of international organizations to participate in sanctions against Russia has undermined the credibility of the existing global political governance system

and shaken the foundation of the global economic governance system ... triggering soaring prices, pushing up inflationary expectations, and posing a huge impact on the world economic recovery.⁴⁸

Similar messages are common across state media, including *Xinhua*,⁴⁹ *People's Daily*,⁵⁰ and CCTV.⁵¹

Given China's integration into the global trading system, sanctions against it on the scale seen in Russia would be devastating (for all sides). China is already facing economic pressure from various sanctions regimes targeting certain companies and individuals, and even products from an entire region – Xinjiang. Delegitimizing sanctions as a tool, while highlighting their negative effects on the West, is an obvious messaging tactic, and an area where Chinese narratives overlap and reinforce their Russian equivalents.

Bloc Confrontation

The opposite of multilateral cooperation through the UN is what China accuses the United States and its allies of pursuing, commonly referred to as “bloc” politics. This is a reframing of defensive alliances as destabilizing and inherently unfair and destructive. It is also frequently framed as a vehicle for expanding American power and hegemony. A common refrain is that NATO (and all US partnerships) pursue “cold war thinking and bloc confrontation.”⁵² An April 2022 article in *Xinhua* celebrates China's proposals on Ukraine, which “promote dialogue and negotiation ... abandoning the Cold War mentality, refraining from bloc confrontation, and genuinely forming a balanced, effective, and sustainable regional security architecture.”⁵³ *China Daily's* description of the war in Ukraine stemming from “US-led anti-Russian military bloc” competition is also common.⁵⁴

Chinese media takes its cue and synchronizes its message from and with the Foreign Ministry. In April 2022 Ambassador Zhang Jun, Permanent Representative to the United Nations, addressed the UN, stating:

Dialogue and negotiation are the only way out of the crisis in Ukraine. We regret to see that sanctions have had a serious negative impact on post-epidemic recovery ... The self-contradictory and inconsistent practice of individual countries claiming to advocate peace while eagerly creating bloc confrontation, including provoking tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, is very dangerous and worrying and should be resolutely resisted.⁵⁵

'Indivisible' and 'Reasonable' Security

In opposition to the damaging ‘bloc’ approach to international security is the notion of ‘indivisible’ or ‘reasonable’ security frameworks, a concept espoused by both China and Russia. This theme in government and state media narratives promotes ‘balance’ and respect for state's core interests. For Russia, this would imply international respect for its sphere of influence in Ukraine; for China it would mean respect for its core interests in Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Speaking to Finland's decision to join NATO, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters that China hopes “that all parties can follow the principle of indivisible security, act on the basis of respect for each

other’s legitimate concerns, and proceed with dialogue and negotiations.” To achieve this, he advocated “a vision for common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security.”⁵⁶

China Daily echoed this concept, advising Western states to “avoid the pursuit of security igniting one powder keg after another ... all stakeholders should discard any lingering Cold War mentality, respect each other’s rational concerns, and try and build a lasting, balanced, and effective security framework through dialogue and negotiation.”⁵⁷ Such rational concerns supersede traditional questions of Westphalian sovereignty, and assume (though always implicitly) that great powers should enjoy a sphere of influence in their near-abroad.

Russia naturally shares this concept of security. In February 2022 Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister explained that there were “differences in the understanding of the principle of equal and indivisible security that is fundamental to the entire European security architecture.”⁵⁸ NATO’s unwillingness to address these fundamental concerns led – in Russia’s understanding – to the war.

Effectiveness of Chinese Messaging

While China has continued to harmonize its messaging towards NATO with Russia and implicitly support Russia’s war in Ukraine, its rhetoric has undergone some notable transformations. The term “special military operation” is no longer used consistently while President Xi Jinping has openly called Russian actions “a war.”⁵⁹ In May 2023, China even voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution, which calls Russia an “aggressor.”⁶⁰ Moreover, in his article titled “Rethinking Ukraine in China,” China’s former Ambassador to Ukraine Gao Yusheng gave an extremely pessimistic forecast of Russia’s future, covertly warning Chinese authorities against strengthening ties with a potentially failed state, and a country for which “it’s only a matter of time before [it] is fully defeated.”⁶¹

Yet, while there have been defections from the approved line, China’s implicit support for Russian narratives remains consistent. According to a Centre for International Governance Innovation report, Beijing has continued to promote the Kremlin’s narrative on the war and censor news and social media content that denounces the invasion or supports Ukraine’s defence against Russian aggression. China also censors celebrities, who have advocated for peace and curtails anti-war voices – including five history professors from China’s top universities who signed an open letter condemning the invasion. Indeed, so widespread was

Figure 5 How positively or negatively do you feel about the following countries?¹⁰

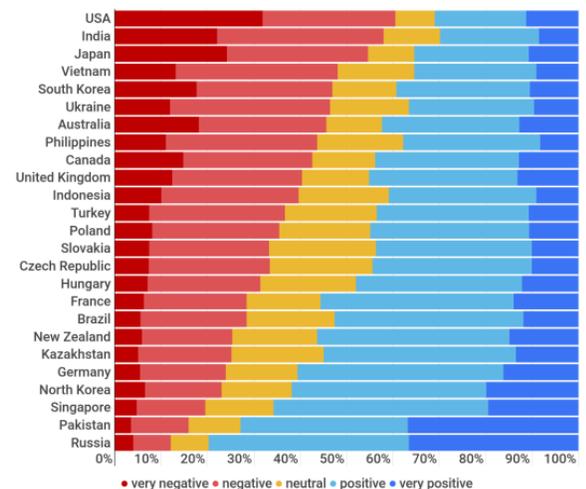
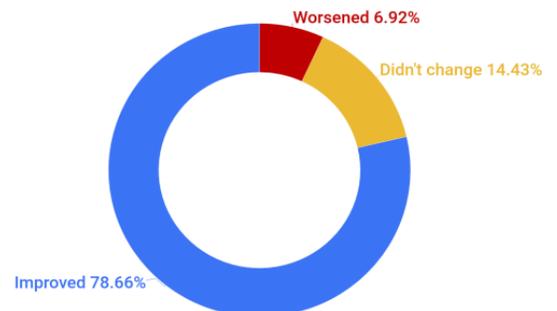


Figure 6 Has your general view of Russia got better or worse during the last three years?¹¹



disinformation on China's internet that a bewildered Weibo user lamented early in the war that "if I only browsed Weibo, I would have believed that it was the United States that had invaded Ukraine."⁶²

China's state media is also pushing Russian narratives globally. According to a CNN analysis, almost half of the most shared posts on Weibo from 14 state media outlets are strongly pro-Russian. Chinese media is also paying to spread these narratives on Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok.⁶³

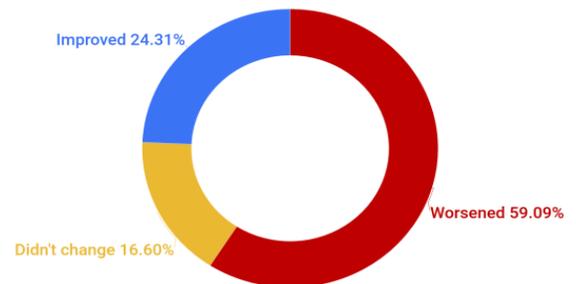
Chinese perceptions of Russia have also fared well during the war. A March 2022 survey by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies demonstrated virtually no damage to the relationship from the Russian invasion. When the survey was taken, Russia was in combat around Kiev but was still the most positively perceived country by Chinese respondents (Figure 5). Asked to rate their feelings toward 25 countries on a scale of 0-100, 79.8% of respondents said they viewed Russia in a positive light while only 12% held negative views.⁶⁴ Perceptions of Russia even improved (figure 7), while perceptions of the United States continued to decline (Figure 6). In this sense, the continued harmonization of state narratives has been a success.

China has not met with similar success in the West. Finland and Sweden have seen a massive (positive) shift in their perceptions of NATO – enough to rapidly move their governments towards applying for membership – while Finnish and Swedish popular perceptions of China have declined in recent years.

Conclusions

China's support for Russia in the information environment is one part of those two states' growing partnership. For China, however, it goes beyond any simple desire to support Russia and, certainly has little to do with Ukraine itself. Beijing has identified its own core interests at stake in Russia's war and reinforced Russian lies primarily with an eye towards its own near-abroad, rather than Eastern Europe. For China, the great danger in this war comes from the further legitimization of sanctions and a weapon against aggressor states – even great powers. China also fears the strengthening and expansion of NATO in Europe and, potentially, into Asia. Other regional US alliances which may mimic NATO are equally to be feared. Likewise, global responses to state aggression outside of the UN framework (which Beijing can veto) are to be resisted. China's support for Russia's fantasy version of the war's causes will continue so long as those align with Beijing's own interests and perceptions of threats to itself and its own neighbourhood. Understanding China's objectives and tactics is therefore more essential than ever and is now an essential element in countering this messaging.

Figure 7 Has your general view of the United States got better or worse during the last three years?¹³



Figures 5-7 from: Richard Q. Turcsányi et. al., "Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war," Palacky University Olomouc and CEIAS4 (2022).

Notes

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