DE-CONSPIRATOR

DETECTING AND COUNTERING INFORMATION SUPPRESSION FROM A TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

D4.3

Semantic Battles and Narrative Contestations:

Studying FIMI Beyond Attribution and Detection Models

Funded by the European Union

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Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASPI	Australian Strategic Policy Institute
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCPCC	Chinese Communist Party Central Committee
CCTV	China Central Television
CE	Christian Era
CGTN	China Global Television Network
D	Deliverable
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organiwation
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference
GCI	Global Civilisation Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GGI	Global Governance Initiative
GSI	Global Security Initiative
IPAC	Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PLA	People's Libarations Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China

RT	Russia Today
SCIO	State Council Information Office (PRC)
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organisation
United Front Work Department	UFWD
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
U.S.	Unted States
WP	Work package

Executive Summary

Not all Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) attempts are disinformation or information manipulation. Frequently, manipulation, influence, and ultimately suppression occur through *semantic battles* and *narrative contestations*: struggles in which actors advance competing understandings of the same concepts, seek to redefine what notions such as freedom, democracy, security or human rights mean, or over the "correct" naming of contested geographic localities; competing narratives that operate not by falsifying facts, but through the selective use of factually correct statements that, by emphasising certain elements while omitting others, thereby producing partial and ultimately distorted representations of reality and shaping the interpretive frames through which events are understood.

By foregrounding *semantic battles* and *narrative contestations*, this working paper broadens the analytical understanding of FIMI, which is often operationalised through a focus on false or misleading content, towards an analysis of FIMI as a practice of world-making. When actors such as China and Russia redefine core concepts and embed these redefinitions in narratives about crisis, order, and future global governance, they are not merely influencing perceptions but constructing alternative political realities that shape legitimacy, authority, and acceptable action. These discursive projects specify who counts as a legitimate actor, which rights and values take precedence, and what kinds of international order appear plausible. FIMI is thus analysed not only as the manipulation of information, but as an effort to stabilise competing worlds through language and story – helping to explain forms of influence that remain difficult to detect within incident- and attribution-centred frameworks.

Taken together, the findings of this paper suggest that analysing FIMI through the lens of worldmaking, semantic battles, and narrative repertoires adds a missing interpretive layer to existing detection- and attribution-centred approaches. Rather than replacing incident-level analysis, this perspective helps specify what to look for and how to interpret patterns once detected, particularly in the Chinese case, where influence efforts have so far rarely been organised around discrete falsehoods or high-volume campaigns. The repertoire typology developed here can inform by identifying China-specific frames, concepts, and narrative structures that link concrete FIMI incidents in Europe – such as responses to protests, elections, sanctions, or security crises – to the underlying logics of Chinese meaning-making. At the same time, it clarifies how these logics intersect with, enable, or condition compatible Russian narratives. Finally, the analysis opens pathways for systematic cross-context comparison by asking which semantic and narrative moves gain traction in European and partner-country publics, through which intermediaries, and how local actors appropriate, resist, or hybridise them. In this sense, the paper provides a conceptual bridge between high-level discourse analysis and operational FIMI monitoring, particularly strengthening analytical capacity where Chinese influence efforts are slow, indirect, and structurally embedded rather than overtly disruptive.

The deliverable is structured around a conceptual and comparative analysis of semantic battles and narrative contestations in Chinese and Russian FIMI. It first outlines the theoretical foundations and methodological approach, before examining Chinese and Russian strategic thinking and key narratives, with greater analytical emphasis on China's less visible and more institutionally embedded practices and Russia serving as a comparative reference point. Two case studies then illustrate these dynamics in practice: the first analyses narrative alignment, borrowing, and divergence in the context of the war in Ukraine; the second examines the construction of consensus around the "Community of Shared Future" and its role in shaping an international environment conducive to Chinese – and indirectly Russian – strategic interests.

1. Introduction

1.1 Aim and Scope of D4.3 – Working Paper on Semantic Battles and Narrative Contestations

A central assumption of the De-Conspirator project is that not all Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) attempts are disinformation or information manipulation. Often information suppression happens through the deployment of factually accurate information wrapped into a strong narrative that triggers emotions. A key dimension of FIMI therefore, is what exists beyond disinformation: namely how narratives compete and semantic contestations occur. Focus on these interactions in a qualitative fashion enables us to see nuances and dynamics that cannot be observed through quantitative or computational methods.

The deliverable is part of the work package WP4 which maps and analyses major FIMI events and builds on preceding De-conspirator deliverables. **It offers a conceptual and interpretive lens for understanding FIMI at the level of meaning, language, and narrative, rather than primarily as a problem of detection or formal attribution. This perspective is particularly important in the case of China, whose party-state employs approaches to FIMI that differ substantially from those used by Russia.**

As highlighted in deliverable D7.3, "Diverging Policy Approaches to FIMI by Russia and China", Russian FIMI is rooted in hybrid-warfare thinking and treats information operations as a low-cost instrument to disrupt adversaries, polarise societies, undermine elections, and weaken collective responses, for instance with regard to Ukraine, relying heavily on social-media manipulation, bots and trolls, and state outlets such as RT and Sputnik, increasingly complemented by AI-enabled techniques like deepfakes. By contrast, China primarily uses FIMI to preserve regime stability and shape international perceptions of its rise, focusing on controlling narratives about China's role in the world, presenting itself as a responsible global actor and counterweight to Western hegemony, and promoting "win–win" cooperation and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) stories of mutual benefit while downplaying or suppressing issues such as debt dependency, human-rights abuses, and political repression, using state media (including Xinhua and CGTN), economic pressure, and digital platforms to advance preferred narratives and deter or silence criticism. These strategic differences are corroborated by the 3rd EEAS Report on FIMI Threats, which finds that, in contrast to Russia's efforts to exploit domestic societal cleavages, repeatedly target elections in the EU and across the post-Soviet space, and erode support for Ukraine and sanctions by seeding distrust in Western defence systems, China generally avoids direct involvement in European domestic conflicts and instead concentrates on issues central to its international image and on topics it defines as "core interests", including human rights, territorial disputes, and matters framed as exclusively internal affairs, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.[1]

Given that China information strategy centres on long-term battles over discourse power and the normalisation of pro-China frames through official narratives, diplomatic language, and state media, the deliverable D2.4 "Coding/Classification Document" highlights important limitations of the EU's DISARM framework for Chinese FIMI. DISARM was built around the analysis of Moscow's online activity, which is the predominat channel of Russian FIMI, and is therefore mostly suitable for Moscow's disruptive actions. This is not to suggest that China does not run impersonation and inauthentic news campaigns comparable to those

[1] EEAS, 3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats. Exposing the Architecture of FIMI Operations (Strategic Communication and Foresight (SG.STRAT), March 2025).

used by Russia; it does. However, exposed Chinese campaigns such as HaiEnergy[2], Paperwall[3], and Dragonbridge[4] have mainly served to promote English-language Chinese state media and official narratives related to China's image and core interests, embedding them within reposted local-language content from domestic outlets. Their content has included criticism of U.S. and its allies, efforts to recast the international image of Xinjiang amid mounting scrutiny, and support for pro-Beijing reforms of Hong Kong's electoral system. These campaigns have also engaged in targeted, often English-language ad hominem attacks on individuals perceived as hostile to Beijing, frequently using standard official phrases like "spreading rumours" and "stirring up trouble" that are readily recognisable to readers familiar with Chinese party discourse. At times, they have amplified conspiracy theories directed at the United States and its partners, for instance by promoting the U.S. biolab theory during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, according to Mandiant Threat Intelligence, which documented these operations, the observable impact of such campaigns has so far been limited, with associated websites and social media accounts generating relatively low engagement. This does not render such campaigns harmless, and their effectiveness may increase over time, warranting continued monitoring. They do not, however, constitute the core of China's FIMI approach in Europe.[5]

As Deliverable D2.3 notes, unlike Russia, Beijing is particularly focused on sustained narrative control through soft power and systemic institutional channels, whith offline strategies like United Front work, elite influencing, and long-term narrative embedding. The challenge of China's slow, long-term approach is that cumulative influence efforts are rarely registered as serious incidents. As D2.3 warns: "There is a growing risk that China's carefully curated and highly institutionalized influence efforts will remain undetected, simply because they do not resemble the more overt, chaotic disinformation surges DISARM was originally designed to track."

Monitoring Chinese FIMI, as D2.4 concludes, should start long before events occur, necessitating strategic monitoring of bureaucratic actors and official documents at the Chinese domestic level to foresee future information strategies. It may sound counterintuitive, but it is essential to read what the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) says – and to take it seriously. In its own particular way, China is relatively transparent and therefore often predictable: with hindsight, Beijing frequently does what it has openly declared it intends to do.

The findings of topic modelling in De-conspirator Deliverable D3.3 for Chinese-language Telegram FIMI channels aimed at the Chinese diaspora point in the same direction. The top topics in the Chinese language -

[2] Mandiant, "Pro-PRC 'HaiEnergy' Information Operations Campaign Leverages Infrastructure from Public Relations Firm to Disseminate Content on Inauthentic News Sites", 4.8.2022, https://cloud.google.com/blog/topics/threat-intelligence/pro-prc-information-operations-campaign-haienergy.

[3] Alberto Fittarelli, *PAPERWALL: Chinese Websites Posing as Local News Outlets Target Global Audiences with Pro-Beijing Content* (Citizen Lab, University of Toronto, 2024), https://citizenlab.ca/2024/02/paperwall-chinese-websites-posing-as-local-news-outlets-with-pro-beijing-content/.

[4] Mandiant, "Pro-PRC DRAGONBRIDGE Influence Campaign Targets Rare Earths Mining Companies in Attempt to Thwart Rivalry to PRC Market Dominance", 28.6.2022, https://cloud.google.com/blog/topics/threat-intelligence/dragonbridge-targets-rare-earths-mining-companies.

[5] Taiwan has been a main target of Chinese disinformation and cognitive warfare, with campaigns aimed to sway voters away from the Democratic Progress Party (DPP) in presidential elections through fabricated rumours against the DPP presidential candidate, or rumours related to everyday issues like food safety or racism, as has been documented by the Taiwanese NGO Doublethink Lab (https://doublethinklab.org). Chinese dissidents have long been a target of transnational repression by the PRC, ranging from physical attacks and legal intimidation to online harassment and threats to family in China. deepfakes and sexual smears targeted exiled activists, including Hong Kong pro-democracy figures facing politicized bounties and arrest warrants. See Sarah Cook, "2025 Recap: Five Key Developments in Beijing's Foreign Information Influence", Substack newsletter, *UnderReported China*, 30.12.2025, https://underreportedchina.substack.com/p/2025-recap-five-key-developments.

national strength and development, opposition to Taiwan independence and emphasis on reunification, resistance to Western threats and interference, Russia-Ukraine war and anti-NATO narratives (largely sourced from Chinese-language accounts of Russian state media), Taiwan Strait tensions, overseas Chinese unity, diaspora challenges, and media/news – closely mirror themes that are already prominent in official Party discourse. Diaspora-specific issues aside, campaign analysis and topic modelling largely reproduce what one would expect from a close reading of Chinese authoritative texts, rather than revealing a hidden or radically divergent narrative agenda. These results suggest that Beijing's influence activities predominantly amplify the same narratives it openly articulates in speeches, policy documents, and state media, seeking to ensure that the stories it explicitly claims to advance are heard, repeated, and normalised internationally. This convergence has also been documented in multilateral fora, for example in the promotion of Chinese narratives on human rights and Taiwan at the UN and in the gradual incorporation of PRC-reinterpreted terminology into UN documents. Chinese official discourse is therefore not merely rhetorical cover but a central analytical entry point: to understand China's external influence strategies, it is necessary to take this discourse seriously and analyse it on its own terms, allowing the Party's own language to indicate what to look for, and where.

Official rhetoric thus functions as an early-warning indicator. Regardless of how much China seeks to insulate itself from the outside world, party directives will continue to circulate, propaganda will continue to be issued, and slogans will continue to course through the system, because they are integral to the CCP's mode of governance.

Against this background, the paper adopts an intentionally asymmetrical analytical focus. While Russia remains an important point of reference throughout, the analysis concentrates primarily on China, using the Russian case comparatively to illuminate where key narratives align or diverge, where China has adapted Russian narratives for its own purposes, and where Chinese narratives may function as enablers or reinforcements of Russian messaging.

Furthermore, the chosen asymmetry is logically defensible on three grounds: division of labour within the project, different levels of prior knowledge, and different epistemic/access challenges:

First, within the De-conspirator architecture, other deliverables already carry most of the empirical and coding burden on Russian FIMI, including incident-level content analysis and the development and testing of tools such as DISARM against Russian campaigns. This Deliverable adds value by deepening the under-developed side of the comparison, namely the conceptual, discursive, and narrative analysis of China.

Second, the state of the art is asymmetrical: Russian FIMI has been intensely scrutinised for a decade, is widely understood in European policy and expert circles, and is comparatively easy to observe because a large share of relevant political texts and propaganda are available in English and other European languages. By contrast, China remains more distant both linguistically and conceptually; the core material for understanding its FIMI practices lies in Party documents, slogans, policy speeches and bureaucratic texts that are rarely translated in full and are harder to interpret without contextual knowledge. This justifies devoting more space to unpacking the "black box" of Chinese discourse than to re-stating well-documented Russian patterns.

Third, the *type* of analytical work required is different. Russian FIMI, being incident-driven, disruptive and heavily "computational" (bots, troll farms, social-media surges), fits relatively well with existing detection- and attribution-centred frameworks such as DISARM. Chinese FIMI, by contrast, is designed as a slow-burn, institutionally embedded project of discourse power and long-term narrative normalisation, much of which takes place through soft power, offline channels, and the routine circulation of Party language. Making this visible necessarily requires more detailed conceptual and textual analysis on the China side.

The Deliverable proceeds as follows: The rest of this chapter sets out the theoretical underpinnings of the analysis, introducing the concepts of semantic battles and narrative contestation and explaining their relevance for the study of FIMI, alongside the overall analytical approach and methodology. Chapters 2 and 3 then examine Chinese and Russian strategic thinking on semantic battles, narrative control, and key narratives. While both cases are addressed, greater analytical space is devoted to China in order to unpack its less visible, more discursive, and institutionally embedded approach to FIMI, with Russia serving primarily as a comparative reference point. Chapter 4 presents a case study on narrative alignments, borrowing, and divergences between Chinese and Russian discourse in the context of the war in Ukraine. Chapter 5 offers a second case study focused on the construction of consensus around the concept of a "Community of shared future", analysing how this narrative contributes to shaping an international environment that is conducive to Chinese interests and, indirectly, supportive of Russia's strategic positioning.

This framing provides the basis for analysing Chinese FIMI as a long-term, discursive, and institutionally embedded practice, while using the Russian case comparatively to clarify points of convergence, divergence, and interaction.

1.2 Theoretical underpinnings – Semantic battles and narrative contestations as practices of worldmaking

Not all FIMI relies on disinformation or fabricated content. Frequently, manipulation, influence, and ultimately suppression occur through *semantic battles* and *narrative contestations*: struggles in which actors advance competing understandings of the same concepts, seek to redefine what notions such as freedom, democracy, security or human rights mean, or over the "correct" naming of contested geographic localities; competing narratives that operate not by falsifying facts, but through the selective use of factually correct statements that, by emphasising certain elements while omitting others, thereby producing partial and ultimately distorted representations of reality and shaping the interpretive frames through which events are understood.

Semantic battles denote conflicts over the meaning and interpretation of specific concepts, terms or phrases. These struggles concern not only definition but also on the political implications attached to particular meanings. The central cognitive strategy lies in managing *polysemy* – the multiple possible meanings of key concepts in public discourse – so that a preferred interpretation becomes naturalised as a part of common sense.[6] Semantic battles are therefore contests over who gets to define terms such as "democracy", "terrorism", or "freedom", and, by doing so, to frame political reality.

An illustrative example is a speech by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, given at a Virtual Dialogue with the Council on Foreign Relations in April 2021, in which he argued that democracy is not Coca-Cola which tastes everywhere the same – a reference, that has since made it into numerous (semi-)official statements and documents, including the 2023 foreign policy White Paper on the "Global Community of shared future"[7]:

[6] Sergey P. Potseluev (С. П. Поцелуев), Alan A. Gaas (А. А. Гаас), and Alexander A. Letunovsky (А. А. Летуновский), "Semantic War in the Space of a Key Symbol: Towards the Theory of an Actual Phenomenon" (Семантическая война в пространстве ключевого символа: к теории актуального феномена), *State and Municipal Management. Scholar Notes.* (Государственное и муниципальное управление. Ученые записки), 2022, 194–200 (194-195), https://doi.org/10.22394/2079-1690-2022-1-2-194-200.

[7] State Council Information Office (SCIO), "A Global Community of shared future: China's Proposals and Actions", 26.9.2023, http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2023-09/26/content_116711115.htm.

> *Democracy is not Coca-Cola, which, with the syrup produced by the United States, tastes the same across the world. […] China's socialist democracy is a whole-process, most representative democracy. It embodies the will of the people, fits the country's realities, and is endorsed by the people. It is undemocratic in itself to label China as "authoritarian" or "dictatorship" simply because China's democracy takes a different form than that of the United States. Using democracy and human rights to conduct values-oriented diplomacy, meddle in other countries' internal affairs or stoke confrontation will only lead to turmoil or even disaster.*[8]

Wang argued that China's "whole-process people's democracy" is representative and legitimate because it reflects national conditions and operates under the Party's leadership, while labelling China "authoritarian" on the basis of Western electoral standards is itself portrayed as undemocratic. In this framing, democracy and human rights are cast as instruments of values-based diplomacy used to interfere in domestic affairs and to provoke confrontation.

In Chinese official discourse, democracy is thus decoupled from electoral competition and redefined through intra-party participation and claims of popular representation by the CCP as the vanguard of the people.[9] Similarly, whereas international human rights discourse emphasises universality and individual protection, Chinese discourse advances a collective and hierarchical conception in which the "right to development" or subsistence takes precedence. Concepts such as democracy, freedom, and the rule of law are nonetheless incorporated into the canon of officially promoted "core socialist values", while being extensively reinterpreted to align with the CCP's ideological framework.[10]

Under Xi Jinping, these efforts have been systematised. His writings on diplomacy, security, human rights, and modernisation have been consolidated into *Xi Jinping Thought*, alongside intensified attempts to construct an autonomous Chinese value system. The leaked *Document No. 9* illustrates the extent to which liberal constitutionalism, universal values, and civil society are perceived as threats to political stability.[11] These concerns are mirrored in a range of security-related laws and regulations introduced over the past decade, including the 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law. As documented in the *Decoding China Dictionary*, key political concepts in contemporary Chinese discourse are continuously contested, redefined, and stabilised.[12] At the international level, China increasingly seeks to normalise a plurality of interpretations by infusing global norms – such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law – with "Chinese characteristics", a process that is increasingly reflected in UN language and documents.[13]

There is partial overlap between Chinese and Russian semantic battles. The Russian Constitution likewise defines Russia as a democracy, and both states argue that the "collective West" instrumentalises democracy

[8] Wang Yi, "Focusing on Cooperation and Managing Differences: Bringing China-U.S. Relations Back to the Track of Sound and Steady Development. Remarks by H.E. Wang Yi State Councilor and Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China at the Virtual Dialogue with the Council on Foreign Relations", 23.4.2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyjh/202405/t20240530_11341530.html.

[9] SCIO, "White Paper: China: Democracy That Works", 12.4.2021, http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2021-12/04/content_77908921.htm.

[10] Malin Oud and Katja Drinhausen, "Decoding China's Political Discourse and Foreign Policy Narratives", in *Decoding China Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (The Decoding China Project 2025), https://decodingchina.eu/decoding-chinas-political-discourse-and-foreign-policy-narratives/.

[11] "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation", ChinaFile, 8.11.2013, https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation.

[12] *Decoding China Dictionary*, 3nd ed. (The Decoding China Project, 2025), https://decodingchina.eu.

[13] Ibid.

and human rights to interfere in domestic affairs. Russia's framing of human rights, however, differs in emphasis. Rather than prioritising development, the Kremlin portrays human rights as a contested domain in which Russia must defend itself against alleged Russophobia, resist Western normative dominance, and protect Russian citizens and "compatriots" from perceived political, cultural, and moral intrusion. In both cases, however, human rights are rearticulated less as individual entitlements than as instruments of sovereignty and regime security.

While semantic battles focus on struggles over the meaning of individual concepts, *narrative contestations* operate at a broader level. They involve competing accounts of events, histories, and political developments that differ in how facts are interpreted, which values are foregrounded, and which objectives are pursued. Although the two frequently overlap, narrative contestations integrate multiple semantic choices into coherent stories that organise actors, events, and norms into meaningful plots. These include master narratives and counter-narratives about crises and political order, such as whether "colour revolutions" are framed as popular pro-democracy movements or as Western-backed destabilisation efforts, as often argued in Chinese and Russian official discourse.

Both semantic battles and narrative contestations can result in forms of information suppression. Place-renaming practices, for instance, exert political pressure by tying terminology to territorial claims and compelling compliance by states, firms, and institutions. China's promotion of "Xizang" in place of "Tibet" seeks to normalise the region as an unremarkable Chinese province and to sever the term "Tibet" from its associations with autonomy or independence. Similar pressure has been applied to airlines and commercial partners regarding references to Taiwan. Suppression can also occur by reshaping the epistemic environment in which information is interpreted. Party-state-linked social media accounts that circulate large volumes of factually accurate images of modern infrastructure and urban development present China as efficient and well governed, resonating strongly in societies where infrastructure decay is a salient concern. At the same time, this narrative omits regional inequalities, debt-driven overcapacity, and the social costs borne by marginalised groups.

Language, therefore, does not just describe the world – it helps produce it. Constructivist scholarship (e.g. Wendt, Adler) has long emphasized that international politics is constituted through shared meanings and interpretive frameworks,[14] while narrative approaches (Miskimmon et al.; Krebs) highlight how political actors organize events, identities, and norms into coherent stories.[15] Post-structural and discourse-theoretical perspectives (Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe, Hansen) further underscored the productive power of language in constituting political realities and shaping the boundaries of legitimate action.[16] Finally, from a world-making

[14] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics", *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997): 319–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066197003003003.

[15] Alister Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Routledge, 2013); Alister Miskimmon et al., eds., Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations (University of Michigan Press, 2018); but also Ronald R. Krebs, Narrative and the Making of US National Security, (Cambridge University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316218969.

[16] Michel Foucault, *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972 - 1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Pantheon Books, 1980); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Routledge, 1972); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso, 1985); Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (Routledge, 2006).

perspective (Goodman), discursive struggles are not merely communicative or persuasive acts, but attempts to construct, stabilise, and contest particular interpretations of international order.[17]

When actors advance competing ontologies, discursive conflict produces competing "worlds." Language becomes a site of struggle over legitimate naming, authoritative interpretation, and recognised agency – what Bourdieu described as the symbolic struggle over the monopoly of legitimate naming, or the power to "make things with words".[18] In (his) other words, "[t]o change the world, one has to change the ways of world-making".[19]

By foregrounding *semantic battles* and *narrative contestations*, this working paper broadens the analytical understanding of FIMI, which is often operationalised through a focus on false or misleading content, towards an analysis of FIMI as a practice of world-making. When actors such as China and Russia redefine core concepts and embed these redefinitions in narratives about crisis, order, and future global governance, they are not merely influencing perceptions but constructing alternative political realities that shape legitimacy, authority, and acceptable action. These discursive projects specify who counts as a legitimate actor, which rights and values take precedence, and what kinds of international order appear plausible. FIMI is thus analysed not only as the manipulation of information, but as an effort to stabilise competing worlds through language and story – helping to explain forms of influence that remain difficult to detect within incident- and attribution-centred frameworks.

From an analytical perspective, this has practical implications for how FIMI is monitored and interpreted. Semantic battles and narrative contestations often unfold gradually, rely on factually accurate material, and operate through institutionalised language rather than discrete incidents, making them difficult to capture through detection- and attribution-centred approaches alone when treated as isolated events rather than cumulative processes. As a result, early warning depends less on identifying individual "false" messages than on tracking shifts in official discourse, recurring narrative patterns, and the cumulative normalisation of alternative interpretive frames. Interpreting FIMI therefore requires attention not only to *what* information circulates, but to *how* meanings are stabilised over time and how this reshapes the context in which political choices are made.

1.3 Approach and Methodology

This working paper adopts a systematic, discourse-analytical "zooming-in" approach that treats language as a core site of FIMI, rather than a mere reflection of underlying policies. Instead of starting from individual campaigns or technical forensics, the analysis begins with the vocabularies, formulations, and storylines through which China and Russia articulate their worldviews, define key concepts, and contest dominant narratives. Substantively, it focuses on two main units of analysis: *semantic battles* over the meaning of key terms (such as "democracy", "human rights", "security", "sovereignty", "colour revolutions") and *narrative contestations* between competing storylines about crises, orders, and futures (for example in relation to Ukraine, Taiwan, or international human-rights regimes).

The core methodology combines close reading and critical discourse analysis of a structured corpus of Chinese and Russian texts. For China, this includes top-level Party-state documents (Xi Jinping's speeches and reports, key Party resolutions, foreign-policy white papers), central media and theoretical outlets (*Xinhua, People's*

[17] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, (Harvester Press, 1978).
[18] Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power", *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (1989): 14–25 (21), https://doi.org/10.2307/202060.
[19] Ibid.

Daily, Qiushi), sectoral and security publications (e.g. *PLA Daily, Military Correspondent*), and foreign-policy communication (MFA press briefings, readouts, embassy statements), complemented by selected state-aligned social media content and establishment-intellectual writings. For Russia, it draws on formal doctrines and strategies (foreign-policy concepts, security and information strategies, military documents), leadership speeches, MFA statements, and state-controlled media, again in dialogue with the counter-narratives these texts seek to confront.

The selection of sources follows the internal hierarchies of both political systems. In China, policy and ideology are articulated through a stratified chain from leadership texts to central media, theoretical journals, sectoral outlets, and diplomatic communication; reading these layers together makes it possible to identify when new formulations appear, how they are interpreted, and how they diffuse into more operational arenas, including FIMI-linked channels. In Russia, formal doctrines and strategies define how information and narratives are conceptualised as instruments of state power, while media and MFA outputs show how these concepts are operationalised in practice. The concrete source choices and the internal hierarchies of documents and outlets for China and Russia are discussed in more detail in the respective empirical chapters.

Analytically, the paper proceeds in a comparative and case-centred fashion. Chapters 2 and 3 reconstruct Chinese and Russian strategic thinking and key narratives by mapping semantic battles and narrative contestations in their respective corpora; Chapter 4 then applies the same lens to the war in Ukraine as a focused case study of alignment, borrowing, and divergence between Chinese and Russian narratives, while Chapter 5 develops a second case study on the construction of consensus around the "Community of shared future" and the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI**)** as a long-horizon, programmatic project of semantic world-making. The analysis does not seek to assess audience reception, behavioural impact, or campaign effectiveness, but to reconstruct the discursive logics that shape how influence is conceived, articulated, and legitimised by state actors themselves. As addressed in section 1.2, this design is explicitly asymmetrical: because Russian FIMI is already extensively analysed elsewhere in the project, the paper devotes more space to unpacking the less accessible and more discourse-centred Chinese case, using Russia primarily as a structured comparator to highlight convergences, divergences, and enabling effects.

All translations from Chinese and Russian sources indicated in the original language have been produced by the authors.

Finally, the approach is explicitly reflexive about tone and positionality. Throughout the paper, official Chinese and Russian framings are quoted and reconstructed **only** as objects of analysis, not as normative claims or endorsements. Where the text adopts the internal logic or language of the actors under study, this reflects the deliberate use of ***strategic empathy*** as an analytical method, understood following Zachary Shore and as emphasised by H. R. McMaster – as a disciplined effort to reconstruct how actors perceive the world, define their interests, and reason about action from within their own conceptual frameworks, without accepting, normalising, or reproducing those views.[20] Strategic empathy does not imply sympathy, agreement, or moral equivalence; it is employed to avoid mirror-imaging and analytical blind spots by taking stated beliefs seriously as drivers of behaviour, in order to render influence strategies intelligible and contestable rather than to perform or propagate them. Source biases and limitations – such as the strategic and curated nature of Party-state and Kremlin documents and asymmetries in language accessibility – are explicitly acknowledged, and the resulting discourse-analytical findings are positioned as a qualitative complement to incident-based and

[20] Zachary Shore, Sense of the Enemy: The High Stakes History of Reading Your Rival's Mind (Oxford University Press, 2014); H. R. McMaster, Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World, Illustrated edition (Harper, 2020).

computational tools developed elsewhere in the project, helping to contextualise *what* those tools detect and *how* their results should be interpreted.

2. China – Strategic Thinking and Key Narratives

Policy-making in China is articulated and disseminated through a clearly tied hierarchy of authoritative documents. At the top are political speeches by the General Secretary of the CCP and President of China, Xi Jinping, followed by their interpretations and discussions by the Party-state system – the state news agency *Xinhua* and the main Party newspaper *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报), and the theoretical journals of the CCP *Qiushi* (求是, which translates as Seeking Truth) and *Red Flag Manuscript* (*Hongqi wengao* 红旗文稿). A further layer consists of sectoral interpretations, including the outlets of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), such as *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun bao* 解放军报) and *Military Correspondent* (*Junshi jizhe* 军事记者), as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) press briefings, which articulate and apply Party formulations in the field of foreign policy. Finally, publications by establishment intellectuals contextualise and debate the official policies and formulations.

As a system, these sources offer insights in which key political terms – *tifa* 提法 – the Chinese official discourse frames what the EU terms as FIMI. *Tifa*, usually translated as "formulation" or "wording", in the Chinese political languages refers to the correct method (*fa*) to raise an issue (*ti*). While they may appear like empty slogans (think "Community of shared future for mankind" or "Socialism with Chinese characteristics"), in China's political system, formalised speech acts help constitute the structure of power. This means that political communication is highly coded. By proscribing some formulations while prescribing others, the Party sets out to regulate what is being said and what is being written – and by extension what is being done.[21] Formulations always come from the highest ranks of the Party, in the Xi era usually from Xi Jinping himself, and subsequently appear as word clusters throughout the system – typically quotes from Xi's speeches, not always marked as such, but clearly recognisable as authoritative due to their continuous repetition and circulation in the Party discourse.

At the same time, this hierarchy should not be read as implying uniformity or automatic coherence. While *tifa* originate at the highest levels of the Party, their interpretation, emphasis, and strategic deployment can vary across institutional contexts, and ambiguity is often deliberately maintained rather than resolved. Analysing authoritative formulations therefore does not equate to reading policy outcomes directly off official rhetoric; instead, it provides insight into the boundaries of what can be said, argued, and justified within the system. In this sense, the sources examined here are treated as an analytical entry point into China's approach to meaning-making and influence, rather than as a complete account of how narratives are received or enacted in practice.

2.1 The Quest for International Discourse Power

Chinese approaches to FIMI are best understood not as ad hoc influence activities, but as extensions of what the Chinese leadership consistently defines as the country's *core interests* (*hexin liyi* 核心利益). These interests – as outlined in the introduction and confirmed by the primary-source analysis in this chapter – anchor Chinese semantic battles and narrative contestations in a stable hierarchy of priorities: defending

[21] Michael. Schoenhals, Doing Things With Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies (Univ. of Calif., 1992), p. 3.

regime security and the political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and shaping an international environment conducive to China's continued economic development and rise. FIMI thus originates not in opportunistic manipulation, but in this structured understanding of threats, interests, and acceptable international discourse.

In official Chinese usage, **core interests** explicitly encompass three interrelated domains, which provide the primary reference points for external narratives and influence efforts:

1. preserving China's basic state system and national security (维护基本制度和国家安全) – a formulation that, in practice, encodes regime security and continued CCP leadership;
2. safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity (国家主权和领土完整) - a phrase that in practice encodes Beijing's insistence on uncontested authority over Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, as well as disputed areas in the South China Sea, the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, and contested border regions with India;
3. ensuring the continued stable development of China's economy and society (经济社会的持续稳定发展) – a formulation that effectively refers to maintaining an international environment favourable to China's economic rise and overall economic security, which in turn underpins the CCP's performance-based legitimacy.

The Party has been long concerned that foreign information and influence could undermine regime security – a fear that has been fuelled by the "Arab Spring" and "Colour Revolutions" in the former Soviet Space, and by the efforts of the U.S. administrations since Obama's "Pivot to Asia" to contain and shape China's rise. Beijing's objective is not limited to correcting Western "misperceptions"; it also seeks to proactively advance the Chinese perspective and narrative in both domestic and international arenas. By asserting its own narrative within global and domestic discourse, the CCP believes it can counter what it perceives as Western attempts to penetrate the fabric of Chinese society through the promotion of so-called universal values such as human rights and democracy.[22] Thus, from the Party's perspective, the expansion of domestic and international influence is inseparable from the preservation of internal stability. Activities that are framed in Western debates as Chinese FIMI are therefore understood domestically as defensive measures against Western interference and perceived efforts to undermine the Party's rule – and, by extension, China itself.[23]

The central concept underpinning these efforts is "discourse power" – *huayuquan* 话语权 – which literally translates as *right* or *power* to speak, as the character *quan* 权 can mean both. At the same time, *huanyuquan* includes the dimension of the right to be heard, and the power to lead and guide debate or to set the parameters of acceptable discourse. The term existed in the Chinese official discourse pre-Xi era, but it was not used frequently.[24] Since Xi Jinping assumed power, *huayuquan* came to denote the CCP's quest to gain

[22] The perceived threat posed by "Western values" is clearly articulated in the leaked Document No. 9 from 2012, which illustrates the extent to which "Western" or universal values, constitutional democracy, and a liberal conception of civil society are regarded as dangers to China's unity and political stability: "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation", *ChinaFile*, 8.11.2013, https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation. See further Malin Oud and Katja Drinhausen, "Decoding China's Political Discourse and Foreign Policy Narratives", in *Decoding China Dictionary*, Berlin: The Decoding China Project, 3rd ed. (2025), https://decodingchina.eu/decoding-chinas-political-discourse-and-foreign-policy-narratives/.

[23] For more detailed discussion, see De-Conspirator deliverable D2.3, "Capturing FIMI in Strategic and Military Doctrines of Russia and China".

[24] David Murphy, "Huayuquan 话语权: Speak and Be Heard", in *China Story Yearbook 2014. Shared Destiny* (ANU Press, 2015), https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2014/forum-mixed-economic-messages/huayuquan-话语

greater influence in the setting of economic and political agendas globally, and in the shaping of global public opinion, which it views as closely related to China's comprehensive national power.

Within this framework, "telling China's story well" (讲好中国故事) and "battle for international public opinion" (国际舆论斗争) are authoritative Party formulations (*tifa*) that function as strategic narrative directives – as two wings of the same strategy – to achieve "international discourse power commensurate with its comprehensive national power and international status" (形成同我国综合国力和国际地位相匹配的国际话语权) [25], and to "change the 'West strong, China weak' pattern of international discourse and to break the Western offensive against China in the battle for international public opinion" (改变国际话语权"西强我弱"格局、打破西方对华舆论战攻势)[26]. A battle, which according to the official and semi-official discourse China has been losing so far.

Before we move into the analysis of the primary sources, we would like to address a question that has been raised by European colleagues with whom we discussed the preliminary findings: how is what China does in terms of semantic battles and narrative contestations different from public diplomacy? The answer is that the typical analytical distinction commonly drawn between (legitimate) public diplomacy and propaganda does not work here for China. When the CCP speaks of "telling China's story well and making China's voice heard" (讲好中国故事，传播好中国声音), it speaks of the "innovation of the external *xuanchuan* (对外宣传) mode". *Xuanchuan* has been at least since the end of First World War the Mandarin translation of the term "propaganda".[27] The term "external propaganda", however, nearly disappeared from CCP's official English language communication in the early 1990s in an effort to rebrand to a less confrontational term: The English name of the Propaganda Department was changed to Publicity Department, the official English language communication began to speak of "public diplomacy" – but the original Chinese term remained the same *xuanchuan.* The State Council Information Office (国务院新闻办公室), which serves as the external communication body of the Chinese government is in fact the same office as the Party's Central Propaganda Department (中央宣传部). It is an institution that carries an inward (Party) facing and an outward (State facing) name – to inform and to propagate is understood as essentially the same.

Nevertheless, public diplomacy as such has been a widely discussed topic in China – during the Hu Jintao era, in particular after 2007, the term figured in official speeches. However, shortly after assuming power, Xi Jinping emphasised the old model of "external propaganda" as he outlined his program for international messaging in his keynote address at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work on 19 August 2013:

> *We must focus on building international communication capabilities, innovate external propaganda methods, strengthen the construction of the discourse system, and strive to create new concepts, new categories and new expressions that bridge China and the world,*

权-speak-and-be-heard/; Stella Chen, "Discourse Power", *China Media Project*, 30.5.2022, https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/discourse-power/.

[25] China News Service (中国新闻社), "Innovate International Communication, Tell China's Story Well" (创新国际传播讲好中国故事), *Qiushi* (求是), no. 19 (2023), https://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2023-10/01/c_1129890464.htm.

[26] Shao Yu 邵宇, Chen Siyu 陈思宇, and Ban Wentao 班文涛, "Unmasking the Deception: Countering Western Propaganda Offensives Against China – Lessons from American NGOs Orchestrating Anti-China Sentiment" (揭开"画皮"：打破西方对华舆论战攻势 – – 美国非政府组织策动反华舆情带给我们的警示), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 5 (2023), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2023nd5q_246799/yldzgzyj_246802/16271381.html.

[27] Aurelio Insisa, "China's Discourse on Strategic Communications: Insights into PRC External Propaganda", *Defence Strategic Communications* 10 (2021): 111–52, https://doi.org/10.30966/2018.RIGA.10.3.

> *tell China's story well, spread China's voice, and enhance China's international discourse power.*
>
> 要着力推进国际传播能力建设，创新对外宣传方式，加强话语体系建设，着力打造融通中外的新概念新范畴新表述，讲好中国故事，传播好中国声音，增强在国际上的话语权。[28]

Subsequent canon (Xi and references to Xi in state-media and Party journals) expands the effort of "building a more effective international communication system" (构建更有效力的国际传播体系), to "pattern reconstruction of international communication" (国际传播格局重构) and building "innovative online external propaganda" (创新开展网络外宣).[29] International communication and external propaganda are seen as constituting parts of one and the same discourse *system* (*tixi* 体系).[30]

Here, as has been highlighted by our colleague Aurelio Insisa in the internal peer review for this paper, it is necessary to take into account the layered meaning of the word "system" withing the Chinese Party-state bureaucracy, which is rendered in Mandarin by two distinct terms: *xitong* 系统and *tixi* 体系. A *xitong* refers to a discrete system tasked with specific functions, whereas a *tixi* denotes a large, integrated system composed of multiple *xitong* subsystems and responsible for a wide range of functions – in effect, a system of systems, or a system's system. These categories are not rigid: no clear or objective conceptual boundary can be drawn between a *xitong* and a *tixi*, as the distinction is ultimately a matter of perspective. From this bureaucratic standpoint, external propaganda can be understood as a *tixi* system articulated across two *xitong* systems in particular, namely foreign affairs and propaganda.[31]

For a Leninist party, propaganda is an instrument to educate and sharpen consciousness, organise society, mobilise support, and maintain ideological unity. In this sense, propaganda work is politically legitimate, as its purpose is to educate the masses and to convince them that the Party is the most capable force to lead. This understanding is rooted in Leninist political thought, which treats persuasion and ideological work as integral to revolutionary and post-revolutionary politics. It differs fundamentally from Western concepts of propaganda, which emerged around the First World War and were later normatively shaped by their association with fascist mass manipulation in regimes such as Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany, where propaganda became synonymous with deception, coercion, and the mobilisation of the masses through spectacle and myth.

[28] "Xi Jinping: Telling the China Story Well, Making China's Voice Heard" (习近平：讲好中国故事，传播好中国声音), State Council Information Office (国务院新闻办公室), 9.4.2013, http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/10/Document/1345245/1345245.htm.

[29] Bill Bishop, "China Media Project Discourse Tracker August 2024", *Sinocism*, 30.10.2024, https://sinocism.com/p/china-media-project-discourse-tracker-9b4?utm_medium=ios.

[30] See Insisa, "China's Discourse on Strategic Communications", p. 130. Insisa argues, that it is necessary to take into account the layered meaning of the term "system" within the Party-state bureaucracy, which is rendered in Mandarin by two distinct terms: *xitong* and *tixi*. A *xitong* refers to a discrete system tasked with specific functions, whereas a *tixi* denotes a large, integrated system composed of multiple *xitong* subsystems and responsible for a wide range of functions – in effect, a system of systems, or a system's system. These categories are not rigid: no clear or objective conceptual boundary can be drawn between a *xitong* and a *tixi*, as the distinction is ultimately a matter of perspective. From this bureaucratic standpoint, external propaganda can be understood as a *tixi* system articulated across two *xitong* systems in particular, namely foreign affairs and propaganda.

[31] Insisa, "China's Discourse on Strategic Communications".

2.1.1 Telling China's Story Well

Calls to "innovate external propaganda" have been a recurring theme since the 1980s.[32] Telling China's story well have become central to Chinese official discourse since Xi Jinping came to power at the 18th Party Congress in 2012. Core tenets of Xi's speech at the National Propaganda Conference in 2013 quoted above, in which he urged to tell China's story well, spread China's voice, and enhance China's international discourse power, were subsequently reiterated, elaborated, and institutionalised through the central propaganda apparatus, notably in leading official media outlets and policy-oriented think tanks. Over time, the formulation evolved into a stable guiding principle of China's external communication strategy. The purpose – and desire – to persuade, educate and convince of the Party's capabilities and legitimacy is consistent across core Party texts, e.g. in Xi Jinping's report to the 20th Party Congress, which calls to

> *accelerate the development of a Chinese discourse and narrative system, tell China's stories well, disseminate China's voice effectively, and present a credible, lovable and respectable image of China*
>
> *加快构建中国话语和中国叙事体系，讲好中国故事、传播好中国声音，展现可信、可爱、可敬的中国形象*[33]

Incidentally, the formulation encapsulates a fundamental difference between the outlooks and strategic approaches of China and Russia – as two European diplomats put it in interviews with *De-conspirator*: "Russia wants to create chaos, China wants to be loved."

In the official discourse of the Party, this quest for recognition is furthermore ultimately linked with the "Chinese culture" – to which the CCP ascribes a 5000-year civilisational continuity and mobilises as a source of historical depth and normative authority, allowing the Party to cast itself as both the guardian and contemporary embodiment of that civilisational tradition. If China's problem is framed not as insufficient power but as insufficient understanding, respect, or appreciation, then culture becomes a primary vehicle through which international perceptions can be reshaped. It is against this backdrop that the strengthening of cultural soft power and the construction of China as a "cultural power" (文化强国) have been elevated to strategic priorities at the highest political level. This logic was articulated most clearly at the 17th Collective Study Session of the Politburo led by Xi Jinping on 28 October 2024:[34]

> *We must continuously enhance our national cultural soft power and the influence of Chinese culture. Cultural soft power and influence are major components of comprehensive national power. At present, as the world is undergoing great changes unseen in a century,*

[32] Insisa, "China's Discourse on Strategic Communications"; Jeffrey Engstrom, *System-Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the People's Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern* Warfare (RAND, 2018): pp. 2-3; Mareike Ohlberg, "Creating a Favorable World Public Opinion: External Propaganda (Duiwai Xuanchuan) as a Global Concept with Chinese Characteristics" (Inauguraldissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Heidelberg, Heidelberg University, 2013), http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/17289/1/Ohlberg_External-Propaganda.pdf: p. 150.

[33] China News Service, "Innovate International Communication, Tell China's Story Well".

[34] Xi Jinping 习近平, "Accelerate the Construction of a Culturally Strong Country" (加快建设文化强国), *Qiushi* (求是), 16.4.2025, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202504/content_7018749.htm. As quite typical with Xi's Politburo speeches, initially only a summary was published, while the full speech was printed in the Party journal *Qiushi* only half a year later, in April 2025. Xi's key messages were summarised in red ink in an article in the right top corner of page 1 of the People's Daily on 29 October 2024.

> *and the competition among countries over the power [or ability] to exert cultural influence grows increasingly intense. As a responsible great power, we must even more proactively promote China's positions, propagate Chinese culture, and showcase China's image. We must advance the restructuring of the international communication landscape, strengthen the overall coordination in external propaganda, innovate online external propaganda, and build a multi-channel and three-dimensional external communication pattern.*
>
> 不断提升国家文化软实力和中华文化影响力。文化软实力和影响力是综合国力的重要组成部分。当前，世界百年变局加速演进，国家文化影响力竞争也日趋激烈。作为负责任大国，我们必须更加主动地宣介中国主张、传播中华文化、展示中国形象。要推进国际传播格局重构，加大外宣工作统筹协调力度，创新开展网络外宣，构建多渠道、立体式对外传播格局。

Culture has always been a battleground for politics for the CCP.[35] Under Xi Jinping, Chinese culture as a resource of comprehensive national power has become a major priority. In CCP discourse, culture is not "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" as, for instance, defined by the UNESCO[36], but one of the Party's key "battlefronts" (战线) in its struggle against its internal and external enemies and critics.[37] Chinese leaders and state-run media argue that China's global cultural strength, which includes its capacity to counter criticism and "tell China's story well", is essential to "breaking through Western cultural hegemony" (打破西方文化霸权) and redressing what is framed as an "unequal relationship" with the West.[38] Culture is consistently *qualified* as "strong socialist culture" – understood as an amalgamation of "China's traditional culture" and "contemporary Chinese Marxism". "Breaking hegemony of Western culture and safeguarding human cultural diversity" is a positioning against "Western institutional models and ideological culture", namely "Western values [which] are by no means 'universal values'".[39] Against this backdrop, the construction of a more effective international communication system is presented as urgent in response to perceived Western narrative dominance, which is said to constrain China's ability to disseminate its own narratives – particularly those associated with initiatives such as the "Community of shared future for mankind" and the Global Development, Global Security, and Global Civilisation Initiatives.[40]

Thus, at its core, China's approach is driven by a quest for international recognition and respect for what it terms its "national dignity and core interests" (国家尊严和核心利益), which are treated as closely

[35] David Bandurski, "Culture", in *Decoding China Dictionary*, 3nd ed. (The Decoding China Project, 2025), https://decodingchina.eu/key-term/culture/.

[36] United Nations, "Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity", OHCHR, 2.11.2001, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/universal-declaration-cultural-diversity.

[37] Wang Baogui 王宝贵, "Stride forward with firm steps in cultural development to enhance the nation's cultural soft power" (迈出文化建设坚实步伐，提升国家文化软实力), Guangmingwang (光明网), 9.11.2020, https://www.gmw.cn/xueshu/2020-11/09/content_34352493.htm.

[38] Li Wen 李文, "The Global Significance of Building a Socialist Cultural Power" (建设社会主义文化强国的世界意义), *People's Daily* (人民日报), 27.10.2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-10/27/c_129339435.htm.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Xinhua, "Why Build a More Effective International Communication System" (为什么要构建更有效力的国际传播体系), www.gov.cn (中国政府网), 17.10.2024, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202410/content_6980903.htm.

interrelated. Chinese official discourse portrays both as being under constant threat and therefore as requiring active defence through sustained struggle.

This logic is articulated explicitly in Xi Jinping's framing of struggle as a permanent condition of governance and international engagement:

> *Any risks and challenges that endanger the leadership of the CCP and our socialist system, any risks and challenges that jeopardise our sovereignty, security, and development interests, any risks and challenges that threaten our core interests and major principles, any risks and challenges that harm the fundamental interests of our people, and any risks and challenges that undermine our pursuit of the Two Centenary Goals and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation – whenever they arise, we must engage in resolute struggle, unwavering and unyielding, until victory is secured.*
>
> 凡是危害中国共产党领导和我国社会主义制度的各种风险挑战，凡是危害我国主权、安全、发展利益的各种风险挑战，凡是危害我国核心利益和重大原则的各种风险挑战，凡是危害我国人民根本利益的各种风险挑战，凡是危害我国实现"两个一百年"奋斗目标、实现中华民族伟大复兴的各种风险挑战，只要来了，我们就必须进行坚决斗争，毫不动摇，毫不退缩，直至取得胜利。[41]

Within this worldview, struggle (斗争) is not framed as a choice but as a necessity, extending beyond the military or economic realm into the domains of discourse, narrative, and meaning. Semantic battles and narrative contestation thus become central instruments through which China seeks both to defend its perceived interests and to secure the recognition and legitimacy it believes to be commensurate with its status and comprehensive national power.

To respond to the perceived complex and severe international public opinion struggle, China must "innovate online external propaganda, and build a multi-channel and three-dimensional external communication pattern", as success is seen imperative for the creation of a favourable external environment for advancing Chinese-style modernisation – meaning, China's rise and development. This link has been established in the "Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernisation", adopted at the third plenary session of the 20th CCP Central Committee, which includes the proposal to "to build a more effective international communication system, and made specific arrangements to provide direction for strengthening international communication capacity-building and comprehensively improving the effectiveness of international communication".[42]

The next section will focus on how these calls are discussed and operationalised by a crucial part of the system – scholars tasked with research on international public opinion warfare.

[41] Xi Jinping 习近平, "Unity and Hard Work Are the Only Way for the Chinese People to Create Great Historical Achievements" (团结奋斗是中国人民创造历史伟业的必由之路), *Qiushi* (求是), 30.6.2025, https://www.qstheory.cn/20250629/45d5f3a91d9245ffb342611b71b72970/c.html. Excerpt from the Speech Delivered at the Symposium Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War on 3 September 2020 (2020年9月3日在纪念中国人民抗日战争暨世界反法西斯战争胜利75周年座谈会上的讲话).

[42] "Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization", PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21.6.2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202407/t20240721_11457437.html.

2.1.2 International Public Opinion Struggle

Debates on how Chinese should find for international public opinion can be find across a wider range of state-linked media and academic sources. For this section, we chose one particular source that offers a comprehensive insight into the debate microcosm: the monthly journal of the People's Liberation Army *Military Correspondent* (*Junshi Jizhe* 军事记者), which includes a dedicated section titled "Research on Public Opinion Struggle" (舆论斗争工作研究). The use of *douzheng* (斗争) – officially translated as "struggle", but also connoting fight or battle – underscores the strategic and conflictual framing of information and public opinion work within PLA discourse. The journal is organized into several recurring sections, with the latter being one among them. Contributors to *Military Correspondent* are predominantly affiliated with institutions such as the National Defence University and related PLA research bodies, positioning the journal at the intersection of academic analysis and defence policy advice. Despite its relevance, the journal has received little attention in both China scholarship and research on Chinese information warfare. Notably, it is available in full-text open access online from May 2020 onward. The internal peer review raised the question whether the positions in the journal are possibly more hawkish given its military background, but this doesn't seem to be the case when comparing the articles there with other publications.

Each issue typically includes between two and five articles in this section, with additional contributions appearing elsewhere in the journal or featured as part of special thematic dossiers. The purpose of the section is the international dissemination of respective ideas – and thus it offers direct insight into how military-affiliated scholars conceptualize discursive conflict and interpret what they perceive as hostile activities of external actors. At the same time, these articles provide us with insight into internal debates over how China should respond. As one scholar at the Military Cultural College of the National Defence University argues, cultural differences have contributed to the limited effectiveness of China's efforts to date, suggesting that "borrowing Western ways of thinking and modes of expression […] can offer important insights for seizing the discourse power in the international struggle for public opinion" (借用西方思维与表达方式 […] 对于抢占国际舆论斗争话语权具有重要借鉴意义).[43]

For this section, first, a distant reading of all articles in the "Research on Public Opinion Struggle" column between Mai 2020 and Mai 2025 (all online available issues) and articles which included the terms "international public opinion struggle" (国际舆论斗争), "international discourse power" (国际话语权) and "international communication" (国际传播) was conducted, which totalled 106 articles. On those, no headlines included references to Europe, the EU (欧) or any European countries. 26 headlines included the U.S. (美), 14 the West (西), though of the latter, 12 were in combination with the U.S. as "the US and the West" (美西方). Russia (俄) was present in 5 headlines. Based on headlines, abstracts and skimming through the article text, articles were selected for close reading. This approach allows to reconstruct how semantic battles and narrative contestations are conceptualized within PLA discourse and to derive an anatomy of these discursive practices.

While the above excerpts from Xi Jinping's speeches talk about China needing to strengthen its international discourse and communication system and make it more effective, the studied articles in the *Military Correspondent* are clear and explicit in their assertion that China is under attack: It is a victim on an

[43] Fang Jing 方晶, "Reflections on Seizing International Public Opinion Discourse Power" (对抢占国际舆论话语权的思考), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 7 (2021), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2021nd7q/yldzgzyj_203281/10106953.html.

international public opinion war launched by the U.S. against China (美国反华智库的国际舆论战), the US is spreading "false narratives" (假叙事) against China, including a "China Threat Theory" (中国危险论).

> *For a long time, the United States, together with its Western allies, has attempted to establish global hegemony over public opinion through various means, manipulating public opinion, creating unrest, and interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, seriously undermining regional security and stability.*[44]

write, for instance, scholars of the Information Engineering University of the PLA Cyberspace Force (中国人民解放军网络空间部队) – a centre for information warfare research.[45] Hereby, two groups, in particular, are perceived as driving the international opinion against China: U.S. think tanks, and NGOs – though think tanks are perceived as playing the leading role.

With regard to the role of think tanks, the following excerpt from an article by a professor of military information and online public opinion at the Department of Political Science of the National Defence University, published in January 2025, represents a set of issues and voiced grievances found across numerous articles, illustrating how think tanks are framed as central nodes in a coordinated narrative and cognitive warfare campaign and a "whole-of-government, whole-of-media, and whole-of-alliance approach" against China:

> *As the strategic rivalry between China and the United States intensifies, anti-China U.S. think tanks have used a binary narrative framework of "democracy versus authoritarianism" as their underlying logic, persistently selling the label of "authoritarian*

[44] See, for instance: Yu Yuanlai 余远来, "Multidimensional Shaping: Guiding the World to Establish a Correct View of China – Reflections on Responding to the International Public Opinion Struggle Waged by U.S. Anti-China Think Tanks" (多维塑造：引导世界确立正确中国观 – – 应对美国反华智库国际舆论斗争的思考), *Military Correspondent*, no. 1 (2025), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2025nd1q/yldzgzyj_250426/16370539.html; Peng Peng 彭鹏, "An Analysis of U.S. Think Tanks' Tactics in the Public Opinion War Against China and Corresponding Response Strategies" (美国智库对华舆论战手段及应对策略探析), *Military Correspondent*, no. 2 (2025), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2025nd2q_250663/yldzgzyj_250667/16383144.html; Hong Hongyun 匡红云 and Luo Ruixin 罗蕊辛, "Reflections on Effectively Countering False Narratives from the United States and the West" (有效应对美西方虚假叙事的思考), *Military Correspondent* 军事记者, no. 2 (2025), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2025nd2q_250663/yldzgzyj_250667/16383145.html.

[45] Ban Wentao 班文涛 and Chen Siyu 陈思宇, "Utterly Deranged: Lifting the Veil on the United States' Construction of Public Opinion Hegemony – A Brief Analysis of U.S. Public Opinion Manipulation Tactics in Kazakhstan's 'January Events', with Reflections on the Warnings for Public Opinion Struggle." (丧心病狂：揭开美国构筑舆论霸权面纱 – – 简析美国在哈萨克斯坦"一月事件"中的舆论操控手段兼谈对舆论斗争的警示), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 2 (2023), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2023nd2q_244890/yldzgzyj_244895/16220186.html. The PLA Cyberspace Force was established in April 2024, when the PLA Strategic Support Force – a branch on the PLA established in 2015 a to fight "informatisation wars" (信息化战争) – was split into three independent arms; the other two are the PLA Aerospace Force (中国人民解放军军事航天部队) and the PLA Information Support Force (中国人民解放军信息支援部队). Internationally, the Information Engineering University of the PLA Cyberspace Force PLA figures under the covers Zhengzhou Information Science and Technology Institute and Zhengzhou Institute of Surveying and Mapping. See, Alex Joske, *Picking Flowers, Making Honey. The Chinese Military's Collaboration with Foreign Universities* (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2018), https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23083.1.

> *state" to attack China's political system. This serves as an outlet for their frustration over the failure of long-held expectations of China's 'peaceful evolution' and reflects mounting strategic anxiety over China's rise. […]*
>
> *U.S. think tanks have also extended Cold War thinking into cyberspace, placing the label of so-called "digital authoritarianism" on China, slandering us for using digital technologies, products, and services to restrict citizens' rights and freedoms and to violate privacy, while producing a large volume of false narratives in this regard. For example, the Hoover Institution in the U.S. held a series of conferences titled "The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism: China, Artificial Intelligence, and Human Rights", inciting so-called "democratic countries" to collectively confront China as an emerging AI superpower. […]*
>
> *Anti-China U.S. think tanks focus their research on China's economic issues by maliciously misinterpreting China's economic system, unjustly accusing China's trade and economic policies, and portraying China's technological advancement as the result of "stealing" from the U.S. and other developed countries. […]*
>
> *Since the Biden administration took office, China has been defined as the "greatest strategic competitor" and the "most significant geopolitical challenger". U.S. think tanks, persisting in Cold War thinking and zero-sum logic, interpret issues related to U.S.-China relations and foreign strategy within this framework and continuously propagate narratives such as "colonialism" and "debt traps" to smear and attack China, doing their utmost to fan the flames of confrontation between China and the West. […]*
>
> *U.S. think tanks have initiated a collective shift towards uniformly negative narratives on China, creating an atmosphere of anti-China "political correctness" that has silenced U.S. and Western China experts and pro-China voices. The characteristics of this cognitive manipulation are increasingly marked by a whole-of-government, whole-of-media, and whole-of-alliance approach.*[46]

Within this framing, think tanks are not portrayed as independent actors but as instruments of "covert government efforts to manufacture anti-China public opinion":

> *Through the revolving door system, U.S. think tanks maintain close ties with the government. Senior officials covertly infiltrate and manipulate think tanks behind the scenes to dictate the themes of their China-related research reports, using these as crucial tools in political gamesmanship against China. On one hand, the U.S. government actively cultivates anti-China report clusters and an anti-China media ecosystem through direct funding and the placement of retired politicians, continuously pressuring political figures to influence government decision-making. For instance, since 2018, the US government has frequently hyped the so-called "forced labour" issue in Xinjiang through covertly aiding anti-China think tanks, cultivating puppet experts, and colluding with unscrupulous media outlets. It disseminates the falsehood of "genocide" and rallies allies to launch a propaganda offensive against China. In 2021, figures such as Mike Pompeo and Mike Pence joined conservative think tanks – the Hudson Institute and the Heritage Foundation – after leaving office, continuing to amplify anti-China narratives and escalate Sino-American*

[46] Yu Yuanlai, "Multidimensional Shaping: Guiding the World to Establish a Correct View of China – Reflections on Responding to the International Public Opinion Struggle Waged by U.S. Anti-China Think Tanks".

> *confrontation. Moreover, most US anti-China think tanks maintain collaborative training programmes with the government, facilitating the advancement of anti-China agendas into congressional hearings to influence legislative decisions. For instance, the Center for a New American Security submitted a report titled "Defending Democracy is a Pillar of US Competition with the People's Republic of China" to Congress, which was subsequently discussed at congressional hearings.*[47]

Think tanks are further framed as instruments of the U.S. and other countries (here Japan and Canada are specifically mentioned) military-industrial complex, with defence industry funding portrayed as incentivising the production of exaggerated assessments of China's military capabilities and the promotion of "China threat" narratives to facilitate large-scale arms procurement:

> *Behind anti-China U.S. think tanks there are generally vested interest groups and financial giants, with social donations and foundation support often serving as the "white gloves" [meaning: front organisations] for these conglomerates. Institutions like the Centre for Strategic and International Studies and the RAND Corporation, due to their close ties with the U.S. military and the military–industrial complex, inevitably seek to align their research outputs with the positions and demands of their financial backers. As a result, various so-called "China strategy reports" and "China military power reports" that exaggerate the "China threat theory" are frequently released, in order to provide "endorsement" for the U.S. government's large-scale weapons procurement. The Center for a New American Security, funded by the U.S. State Department and the Pentagon, has in recent years received substantial funding from American arms manufacturers, oil companies, banks, as well as entities from Japan and Canada, and has become an important cheerleader for instigating Sino-American confrontation.*[48]

Think tanks are furthermore perceived as having and using platform power – i.e. the capacity to amplify particular issues and frames through their institutional authority, access to policymakers, and embeddedness in media and expert networks. Through reports, events, and commentary, they are perceived to generate platform effects that normalise specific narratives – such as those on Taiwan or a "Chinese military threat" – and shape both policy agendas and public discourse by determining what is visible, credible, and debated:

> *Anti-China U.S. think tanks excel at building platforms that influence government decision-making and public opinion. They do so by launching think tank websites, creating social media accounts, giving media interviews, hosting academic seminars, and participating in congressional hearings – through these activities, they design a U.S. strategic communication framework and generate a surge of anti-China public discourse. On the one hand, anti-China U.S. think tanks have established stable cooperative relationships with the media, regularly and proactively using media platforms to voice their views. Moreover, U.S. think tanks have extended their reach into the media of other Western countries. According to the Brookings Institution, its researchers have served as "regular commentators for the BBC and other European radio and television stations".*[49]

[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.

Accordingly, think tanks actively exploit platform effects by coordinating with allied think tanks, cultivating opinion leaders, and maintaining close relationships with mainstream international media. This enables their reports – here, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) are mentioned specifically as publication amplifying a "China nuclear threat" – to gain broad visibility, thereby shaping public perceptions of China.[50] Think tanks are furthermore described as excelling in dissemination by adapting to the fragmented reading habits of the social media era, translating specialised reports into accessible social media language and thereby enhancing their communication effectiveness – something, as is implied, China is not yet similarly capable of.[51]

Although discussed less extensively than think tanks, NGOs are also portrayed as instruments in the public opinion struggle against China. By way of example, an article by scholars from the National Defence University, affiliated with the Central Military Commission, frames NGOs as instrumental extensions of Western – primarily U.S. – state power rather than as independent civil society actors.[52] They are accused of having functioned as auxiliary instruments of U.S. foreign policy and propaganda since the Cold War, operating as "front organizations" (白手套) through which the U.S. government is said to advance hegemonic objectives while maintaining plausible deniability. A central accusation is that NGOs are used to foment colour revolutions and political instability by acting as opinion leaders and mobilisers who exploit social unrest in target countries. Framed as operating under the cover of human rights, environmental protection, media freedom, or public welfare, they are portrayed as shaping public opinion, steering policy outcomes, and interfering in the domestic affairs of other states in ways intended to contain and weaken China. NGOs are further depicted as key nodes in a global media and information network that amplifies anti-China narratives:

> *American NGOs, under the guise of so-called "press freedom" and championing the notion of "media independence", have extensively established media networks worldwide to create multiple channels for anti-China propaganda.*[53]

NGOs are accused of cultivating so-called "independent media" (独立媒体), funding journalists and outlets, and disseminating disinformation (不实报道) – particularly on Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan – thereby shaping negative international perceptions of China and reinforcing cognitive bias through what is described as Western discourse hegemony. Beyond media influence, NGOs are portrayed as engaging in grassroots infiltration by embedding themselves in local societies through aid, education, healthcare, and livelihood projects – all classical aid topics that are here framed not as humanitarian assistance but as efforts to lay the cognitive groundwork for anti-China sentiment. This understanding mirrors China's own United Front Work. Finally, it is argued that NGOs are effectively directed by the U.S. government through funding, personnel overlap, and institutional coordination, producing what is denoted as an "anti-China 'industrial

[50] Yu Yuanlai, "Multidimensional Shaping: Guiding the World to Establish a Correct View of China – Reflections on Responding to the International Public Opinion Struggle Waged by U.S. Anti-China Think Tanks"; Peng Peng, "An Analysis of U.S. Think Tanks' Tactics in the Public Opinion War Against China and Corresponding Response Strategies"; Hong Hongyun and Luo Ruixin, "Reflections on Effectively Countering False Narratives from the United States and the West".

[51] Peng Peng, "An Analysis of U.S. Think Tanks' Tactics in the Public Opinion War Against China and Corresponding Response Strategies".

[52] Shao Yu 邵宇, Chen Siyu 陈思宇, and Ban Wentao 班文涛, "Unmasking the Deception: Countering Western Propaganda Offensives Against China – Lessons from American NGOs Orchestrating Anti-China Sentiment" (揭开"画皮"：打破西方对华舆论战攻势 – – 美国非政府组织策动反华舆情带给我们的警示), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 5 (2023), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2023nd5q_246799/yldzgzyj_246802/16271381.html.

[53] Ibid.

chain'" (反华"产业链") linking NGOs, media, separatist groups, and governments in a sustained campaign of narrative warfare and strategic containment.

Wordings such as anti-China "industrial chain" (产业链) or anti-China "assembly line" (流水线) recur prominently in these depictions, conveying the idea of a systematic effort to fabricate and amplify anti-China narratives. The U.S. and the West are accused of promoting a range of "anti-China topics" trough the binary narrative framework of "democracy versus authoritarianism" (民主对抗威权) and labelling China as an "authoritarian state" (威权主义国家). This framing, so the argument goes, serves as an outlet for frustration over the absence of regime change in China and reflects deeper strategic anxieties about China's rise.[54] An illustrative example of this line of thinking can be found in discussions of Xinjiang:

> *The so-called "genocide in Xinjiang" is a century-defining lie jointly fabricated by Western think tanks, media, politicians, and legislatures. First comes think tank production: Adrian Zenz, a German scholar who has never been to Xinjiang, took the lead in concocting the "Xinjiang genocide" theory. Think tanks such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) and Zenz frequently cite each other's "research findings" and repeatedly release "research reports" on so-called "concentration camps" and "forced labour" in Xinjiang. Second is media dissemination: outlets such as Voice of America and The New York Times quickly followed up, hyping and amplifying the narrative. Third comes political intervention: U.S. officials like Mike Pompeo and Antony Blinken falsely accused China of committing "genocide" in Xinjiang. Fourth is legislative action: the U.S. Congress, putting on an air of seriousness, passed bills such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.*[55]

Another example of the perceived assembly refers to China's grey zone operations in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. Here, it is argued:

> *First, official actors propose the conceptual definition of the "grey zone" and formulate major issues and operational objectives at the strategic level, making them public. The U.S. Department of Defence first introduced the concept of the "grey zone" in the 2010 Quadrennial Defence Review. The 2018 National Defence Strategy explicitly identified China and Russia as strategic competitors. In April 2021, Joint Force Quarterly of the U.S. National Defence University published an article proposing a theoretical framework for "grey zone" conflict, emphasising the use of countermeasures and retaliation to strike strategic adversaries and enable the United States to regain its advantage in the "grey zone".*
>
> *Second, think tanks conduct agenda design and set the tone of viewpoints. In recent years, think tanks have carried out extensive research on Chinese and Russian "grey zone" threats. Institutions such as the Centre for Strategic and International Studies and the RAND Corporation have continuously released dozens of reports elaborating their role and strategies in the Sino–U.S. strategic competition. In August 2020, the Centre for a New American Security argued in its report Defining Department of Defence Role in Grey Zone*

[54] Yu Yuanlai, "Multidimensional Shaping: Guiding the World to Establish a Correct View of China – Reflections on Responding to the International Public Opinion Struggle Waged by U.S. Anti-China Think Tanks".
[55] Hong Hongyun and Luo Ruixin, "Reflections on Effectively Countering False Narratives from the United States and the West".

> *Competition that enduring great power competition increasingly takes place in the "grey zone" between war and peace.*
>
> *Third, scholars provide theoretical interpretation. This not only releases additional informational content around the "grey zone", but also serves as a form of "trial balloon", maximising public opinion effectiveness. Denny Roy of the East–West Centre has argued that China's strategy in the South China Sea constitutes a "naval war without gunfire" that harms U.S. interests without crossing military red lines. Scholars James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara of the U.S. Naval War College have argued that developing and employing non-military sea power constitutes a sophisticated and systematic Chinese strategy to safeguard maritime rights. They describe the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff as a quintessential "grey zone" action, calling it China's "small-stick diplomacy".*
>
> *It is worth noting that U.S. and Western public opinion struggle around the "grey zone" has evolved from an earlier pattern of think tanks and scholars taking the lead to one dominated by official actors: U.S. officials first manufacture issues, think tanks then follow up to form agendas, and scholars subsequently amplify momentum through interpretation.*[56]

Finally, China is also described as a target of lawfare, or what the author of the following article, a scholar at the National Defence University, termed "false legal discourse" (虚假法律话语) – an argument that is particularly associated with the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea. According to this narrative,

> *The U.S. and its allies frequently engage in provocative actions in the South China Sea, including close-range harassment of Chinese vessels and aircraft, illegal intrusions into waters and under China's jurisdiction, and dangerous manoeuvres that endanger personnel and undermine regional stability. Responsibility for these incidents is nevertheless shifted onto China, with such actions justified as being grounded in international law and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), despite the United States not having acceded to the Convention.*[57]

At the same time, the U.S. is said to

[56] Xu Meng 徐萌 and Liu Yuhang 刘宇航, "Strategic Considerations for Responding to the U.S. and Western 'Grey Zone' Public Opinion Struggle" (应对美西方"灰色地带"舆论斗争策略考量), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 10 (2021), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2021nd10q/yldzgzyj_203264/10115945.html.

[57] See e.g. Xu Meng 徐萌, "An Urgent Challenge: Seizing the Legal and Moral High Ground of the International Public Opinion Battlefield - On Enhancing China's International Discourse Power through an Examination of the U.S. Use of False Legal Discourse on China" (迫在眉睫：抢占国际舆论场法律道义制高点 – –从美国对华虚假法律话语运用谈提高我国际话语权), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 1 (2025), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2025nd1q/yldzgzyj_250426/16370537.html; Xu Meng 徐萌 and Liu Yuhang 刘宇航, "Strategic Considerations for Responding to the U.S. and Western 'Grey Zone' Public Opinion Struggle" (应对美西方"灰色地带"舆论斗争策略考量), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 10 (2021), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2021nd10q/yldzgzyj_203264/10115945.html.

> *use its powerful media influence to fabricate and spread false legal narratives that depict China's legitimate rights-protection activities as "coercive", thereby shaping global public opinion and damaging China's image in parts of the international community.*[58]

More broadly, U.S. legal rhetoric is depicted as a long-standing instrument for advancing deceptive legal practices against China and as an effort to manipulate international influence by setting the terms of debate, shaping cognitive frameworks, and fixing narrative boundaries in ways that safeguard U.S. interests and hegemonic power. From this perspective, lawfare emerges as a central arena of semantic battle, in which legal language itself becomes a tool for contesting legitimacy, responsibility, and authority in international politics.

Taken together, these claims shed light on how key strands of official Chinese discourse conceptualise the relationship between discourse power, narrative control, and geopolitical competition. The United States and the wider West are portrayed as leveraging "hegemonic discourse power" and "global communication advantages" to monopolise the authority to define, characterise, and interpret international events. In this reading, narrative dominance serves to present Western actions as inherently just, lawful, and legitimate, while securing political and strategic initiative. Such practices are said to reinforce deterrence, demoralise opponents, and – among allies – align public opinion with shared strategic objectives and material interests, thereby facilitating coordination through narrative shaping. Within this framework, U.S. think tanks are depicted as contributing to an atmosphere of "anti-China political correctness" that marginalises China specialists and China-friendly perspectives across the United States and the broader Western discourse.

2.1.3 Tactics Proposed for How China Should Respond

Discussions of how China should respond provide important insight into the strategies underpinning semantic battles and narrative contestation. They reveal how Chinese actors diagnose perceived weaknesses, identify areas in need of improvement, and articulate priorities for enhancing China's discourse power. At the same time, such debates offer indications of how Chinese narrative strategies are likely to evolve, particularly where recurring calls for reform suggest perceived gaps between ambition and existing capabilities. Notably, these discussions are marked by a pervasive use of prescriptive language – most prominently the repeated framing that China "should" act in certain ways. Such formulations are analytically revealing, as they point less to existing capabilities than to perceived deficiencies, signalling areas where Chinese actors believe current practices fall short.

2.1.3.1 Innovate the external discourse system – Targeted communication

In their recommendations, nearly all closely analysed articles make reference to Xi Jinping's call to "innovate the external discourse system", unpacking it into organisational and narrative requirements rather than treating it as a mere slogan. On the organisational level, authors emphasise the need to build a more integrated and coordinated system of external communication – one that can oversee overall strategy, improve coordination across actors, and enable cooperation between different government departments. This emphasis suggests that existing Chinese efforts resembling foreign information manipulation and interference are, in practice, more fragmented and less centrally coordinated than is often assumed. At the same time, authors argue that such coordination must be guided by a *United Front* approach to communication. In this view, domestic and international audiences, as well as online and offline spaces, are treated as interconnected

[58] Ibid.

arenas of struggle over public opinion. The goal is to simultaneously counter actors labelled as "hostile forces" while persuading broader and more ambivalent audiences. This includes making greater use of social media influencers and online personalities to extend the reach and appeal of official narratives.[59]

Substantively, however, the discussion focuses most heavily on the need for more *targeted communication*.[60] A recurring criticism is that China's external messaging still relies too much on rigid, formulaic Party language that resonates poorly with foreign audiences. Instead of uniform, standardised propaganda, authors call for a more differentiated approach – summarised in the formula "one policy per country, one policy per locality, and one policy per media outlet" (深化"一国一策""一地一策""一媒一策"的传播模式).[61] This means tailoring messages to specific national contexts, sub-national settings, and individual platforms in order to make Chinese narratives more relevant, persuasive, and effective.

This push for fine-tuned communication is explicitly linked to the use of digital technologies such as big data and cloud computing. These tools are presented as ways to segment audiences based on factors such as emotional preferences, media consumption habits, and levels of understanding. By using algorithmic recommendations and real-time feedback, messaging can be continuously adjusted in response to audience reactions, with the aim of increasing familiarity with – and acceptance of – Chinese perspectives.

Beyond persuasion alone, the discourse also frames external communication as a strategic resource in political, diplomatic, and even military competition. Authors argue for the development of platforms and media products designed specifically for overseas audiences that can clearly convey Beijing's positions and fully exploit public opinion as a tool in broader struggles. This includes supporting pressure tactics such as political influence, sanctions, and psychological operations, with the stated objective of weakening adversaries' resolve and cohesion without the use of force.

Finally, innovation in external discourse is presented as a way to improve the *precision* of influence efforts. This involves identifying ideological weak points, psychological attachments, and sources of motivation within target audiences, and then targeting them directly. Techniques discussed include challenging dominant narratives, highlighting perceived inconsistencies or hypocrisy, and undermining confidence in existing beliefs – ultimately aiming to generate confusion, doubt, and declining commitment among adversaries.

[59] See e.g. Jiang Nan 姜楠, "Grasping the Big Picture: Securing the High Ground in the Battle for International Public Opinion – Enhancing Our Capabilities in the Struggle for Global Public Opinion in Light of the Propaganda Campaign Orchestrated by the United States and Western Nations" (把握全局：抢占国际舆论斗争制高点 – – 从美西方国家策动的舆论战谈提升国际舆论斗争能力), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 4 (2024), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2024nd4q_249774/tbch_249783/16334297.html.

[60] Ibid.; Sun Jian 孙健 and Mei Zhifeng 梅志峰, "Pre-Emptive Strike: Securing the Initiative in International Public Opinion Battles – Practical Application and Reflections on the Primacy Effect Theory in the Era of Omni-Media" (先发制人：牢牢把握国际舆论斗争主动权 – – 全媒体时代首因效应理论运用的实践与思考), *Miitary Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 2 (2025), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2025nd2q_250663/yldzgzyj_250667/16383147.html; 莫一斐 Mo Yifei and 余远来 Yu Yuanlai, "Innovating Concepts: Effectively Addressing Shortcomings and Weaknesses in International Communication – Reflections on Comprehensively Enhancing China's Global Communication Effectiveness" (革新理念：切实补齐国际传播的短板弱项 – – 全面提升国际传播效能的几点思考), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 2 (2023), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2023nd2q_244890/tbch_244893/16220161.html

[61] Mo and Yu, "Innovating Concepts: Effectively Addressing Shortcomings and Weaknesses in International Communication".

2.1.3.2 Seek to gain the initiative

The analysed discourse calls China to adopt a less reactive and more proactive posture in public opinion struggles – to "gain the initiative through pre-emptive strikes" (先发制人) – by defining narratives early. In this understanding, gaining the initiative means being the first to speak about an issue and thereby forcing others to respond within a narrative framework already shaped by China. Drawing explicitly on the *primacy effect* from persuasion theory, cadres from the Political Work Department of the PLA's Xinjiang Military District – which reportedly became the premier training area for developing "informatized" warfare for the PLA in the mid-2000s and what the Chinese government described as the "war on terror" in Xinjiang[62] (explicitly borrowing the then George W. Bush counterterrorism rhetoric to legitimise its campaign) – argue that early, agenda-setting interventions have a disproportionate influence on how subsequent information is interpreted[63] Whoever speaks first, they suggest, anchors causal interpretations, moral judgments, and assessments of legitimacy – something that should be applied on issues defined as China's "core interests".

As an illustrative case, they point to CGTN's four-part commentary series launched in response to Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. The four interconnected segments combined personal attacks on Pelosi, a historical and legal exposition of the Taiwan question and the One-China principle, and a justification of PLA military exercises as legitimate and necessary deterrence. Taken together, the series is presented as a deliberately constructed narrative package that offered international audiences a ready-made interpretive framework in which China appeared as the defender of sovereignty, legality, and regional order. For Sun and Mei, this example demonstrates that seizing the initiative requires providing foreign audiences with a pre-structured narrative environment rather than reacting piecemeal to external criticism.

The same logic is applied to the 2020 Sino-Indian border clashes. Here, the authors contrast China's earlier low-profile communication style with what they portray as a more effective approach: rapid, authoritative statements by military and defence officials that framed China's actions as defensive, lawful, and forced by Indian behaviour. By speaking early and repeatedly, they argue, Chinese actors were able to occupy what they describe as the moral and legal high ground, countering Indian media narratives portraying China as the aggressor or exaggerating Chinese casualties.

Notable, neither of the cases was perceived as a "win" for China in the European discourses. It matters, however, to know, that Chinese state actors frame both cases as a success.

2.1.3.3 "Build boats to go out to sea" and "Borrow boats to go out to sea"

The two metaphors function in the Chinese discourse for building und using channels of international communication. "Build ships to go out to sea (*zaochuan chuhai* 造船出海) means creating and strengthening China's own international media and communication platforms: investing in professional, mobile, social and visual formats, and making official accounts more readable and reputable to increase their impact on global

[62] Martin Andrew, "Beijing's Growing Security Dilemma in Xinjiang", *China Brief. Jamestown*, 6.7.2005, https://jamestown.org/beijings-growing-security-dilemma-in-xinjiang/.

[63] Sun Jian 孙健 and Mei Zhifeng 梅志峰, "Pre-Emptive Strike: Securing the Initiative in International Public Opinion Battles – Practical Application and Reflections on the Primacy Effect Theory in the Era of Omni-Media" (先发制人：牢牢把握国际舆论斗争主动权 – – 全媒体时代首因效应理论运用的实践与思考), *Miitary Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 2 (2025), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2025nd2q_250663/yldzgzyj_250667/16383147.html.

public opinion. "Borrow boats to go out to sea" (*jie chuan chuhai*借船出海), means using existing international platforms that are friendly, relatively objective or influential: selectively cooperating with international media, outlets and influencers (through exchanges, information provision and visits) to amplify China's messages and expand the channels through which China can "have a voice" abroad.[64] The tactic has been documented for the Chinese military by Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Michael Chase[65] , and is now increasingly used more generally beyond the military domain.

2.1.3.4 Strengthen Chinese think tanks and Track Two Diplomacy

In the analysed articles, Chinese think tanks are assessed to be weak in international communication capabilities and as having a limited voice on the global stage – despite the fact that China ranks second in the number of think tanks. To address this, it is argued, China must draw lessons from the linkage model between US think tanks, media and government. Chinese think tanks should establish better linkages with foreign governments and international media, launch own globally oriented journals, strengthen interaction and exchanges with international peers, and host large-scale international forums on global and critical issues. They should can act as brokers of ideas, providing research results infused with "Chinese wisdom", engage in competitive and strategic interaction with overseas counterparts, ad amplify the international presence of pro-China voices through joint research, talent exchange and result sharing with international think tanks. The need to function (better) as as storytellers of China, and work on recalibrating how foreign elites and the public perceive China – helping to "dispel misunderstandings, build trust, and clarify doubts".[66]

2.1.3.5 Apply Weak Communication Theory

Cadres from the Political Work Department of the PLA's Xinjiang Military District argue that China should adopt "Weak Communication" as a strategic framework for enhancing China's international discourse power.[67]

[64] Peng Peng 彭鹏, "An Analysis of U.S. Think Tanks' Tactics in the Public Opinion War Against China and Corresponding Response Strategies" (美国智库对华舆论战手段及应对策略探析), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 2 (2025), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2025nd2q_250663/yldzgzyj_250667/16383144.html; 莫一斐 and 余远来, "Innovating Concepts: Effectively Addressing Shortcomings and Weaknesses in International Communication – Reflections on Comprehensively Enhancing China's Global Communication Effectiveness" (革新理念：切实补齐国际传播的短板弱项 – – 全面提升国际传播效能的几点思考); Jiang Nan 姜楠, "Taking the Initiative: Effectively Countering the Military 'Discourse Trap' Set by the US and the West – On Innovating Strategies and Tactics for International Public Opinion Struggles in Response to the Military 'Discourse Trap' Set by the US and the West Against China" (以我为主：有效破解美西方设置的军事"话语陷阱" – – 从美西方对中国设置的军事"话语陷阱"谈创新国际舆论斗争策略手段), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 6 (2024), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2024nd6q_250221/tbch_250229/16359351.html.

[65] Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Michael Chase in Borrowing a Boat out to Sea: The Chinese Military's Use of Social Media for Influence Operations (Johns Hopkins SAIS, 2019).

[66] See e.g. Peng Peng, "An Analysis of U.S. Think Tanks' Tactics in the Public Opinion War" and Yu Yuanlai, "Multidimensional Shaping: Guiding the World to Establish a Correct View of China".

[67] Sun Jian 孙健 and Mei Zhifeng 梅志峰, "There Is Strength in Being Gentle: Strive to Enhance the Wisdom of Struggle and Improve the Quality and Efficiency of Struggle: Research on International Public Opinion Struggle Strategies Based on Weak Communication Theory" (柔中有刚：努力增强斗争智慧提高斗争质效 – – 基于弱传播理论的国际舆论斗

Coined by Zou Zhengdong, communication scholar at the Xiamen University's School of Journalism who has not received attention outside China, the "Weak Communication Theory" who argues that in public communication, strength and weakness are inverted.[68] Actors who appear "weak" tend to get more sympathy than actors who appear "strong". Accordingly, in order to gain international recognition and understanding, China's international communication needs a discursive shift from emphasising China's achievements and its image as a rising power, to narratives around building friendships, enhancing local development, fostering mutual development. Moreover, since China's main internationally facing media have shown not to work effectively in the international context, more use should be made of "semi-official, critical, or alternative voices that appear more independent or emotionally resonant". This means, for instance, that journalists should be allowed to (apparently) go against the mainstream line, to increase the credibility of the medium they are working for.

2.2 Chinese Key Narratives

2.2.1 The CCP is good and China is a "democracy that works"

In English-language official discourse tries to convince foreign audiences that the Communist Party of China genuinely strives for the people's well-being and that Socialism with Chinese characteristics is effective. This is articulated most clearly through the concepts of "whole-process people's democracy" and the slogan "China: Democracy That Works" – the latter is the English title of a 2021 White Paper (which in China reads simply as "China's Democracy" 中国的民主).[69] English language Chinese state media widely quoted Xi Jinping saying,

> *Whole-process people's democracy is the defining feature of socialist democracy […] It is democracy in its broadest, most genuine, and most effective form.*[70]

English-language Xinhua, China Daily, Qiushi and government white papers consistently present the CCP as the actor that made this functioning democracy possible – by ending poverty, maintaining stability, and managing crises such as Covid-19 – thereby justifying one-party rule as the condition for democratic performance. In this framing, the Party has "no special interests of its own" and faithfully represents the people, in contrast to Western systems characterised as "democracy of money" and gridlocked by partisan conflict.[71]

Official and aligned commentators explicitly claim that Chinese democracy is "more genuine and more effective" than American or liberal democracy, because it combines extensive consultative mechanisms,

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争策略研究), *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), no. 5 (2024), http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/jsjz/2024nd5q_249987/yldzgzyj_249992/16346972.html.

[68] Zou Zhendong (邹振东), *Weak Communication. The Law of the Jngle In The Public Opinion World* (弱传播(舆论世界的哲学)) (National School of Administration Press (国家行政学院出版社), 2018).

[69] SCIO (State Council Information Office), "White Paper: China: Democracy That Works", 12.4.2021, http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2021-12/04/content_77908921.htm.

[70] Xinhua, "China: Democracy That Works", 11.3.2024, https://english.news.cn/20240311/fce3f178e743435bb228014dd3a6fdc2/c.html.

[71] CGTN, "China Says Democracy Is Not Coca-Cola with Same Taste Worldwide", 20.8.2021, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-08-20/China-says-democracy-is-not-Coca-Cola-with-same-taste-worldwide-12SI70N869G/index.html.

meritocratic selection, and policy continuity with material improvements in living standards. CGTN opinion pieces and Xinhua commentaries argue that Western democracies are obsessed with "form" and elections, whereas China offers a higher-quality democracy rooted in cultural particularity and collective well-being, positioning the Chinese model as a normative competitor rather than a deviant.[72]

2.2.2 China is not a "threat"

A recurring narrative cluster seeks to delegitimise the "China threat theory" and to recast China's rise as inherently peaceful and beneficial. In English-language communication, this appears most explicitly in the long-standing discourse of "peaceful development" or "peaceful rise" and "combined with direct attacks on the "China threat" label itself. Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Xinhua commentaries and MFA spokespeople repeatedly declare that it is "time for the 'China threat theory' to be laid to rest", describing it as an "international laughing stock" comparable to the earlier "China collapse theory".[73]

Within this framing, threat perceptions are attributed not to Chinese behaviour but to U.S. "hegemonic anxiety" and domestic political incentives, particularly the need to justify military spending, containment strategies, and alliance-building. Official commentary often flips the script by arguing that China is "not a threat to anyone", while the real threat to peace and stability comes from U.S. militarisation, alliance politics and "Cold War mentality" in Asia.[74] Xinhua and MFA statements point to U.S. defence spending, freedom-of-navigation operations and alliance initiatives like the Quad as evidence that Washington, not Beijing, is the main driver of regional insecurity, thereby recasting fear of China as a projection of U.S. exceptionalism and hegemonic behaviour.

A more recent tactic within this narrative is to saturate the information space with highly detailed announcements ahead of major drills, thereby constructing a veneer of procedural legitimacy around coercive military actions. PLA theatre commands and maritime safety authorities now routinely publish lengthy readouts in English that specify exercise code names, precise coordinates, time windows, and mission objectives, coupled with navigation warnings that declare surrounding waters and airspace off-limits and instruct "unrelated vessels or aircraft" to stay away.[75] By framing expansive live-fire drills and quasi-blockade operations around Taiwan and in the South China Sea as properly notified "military training" conducted in designated danger zones, official messaging recasts them as lawful, responsible risk-management rather than unilateral attempts to change the status quo.

2.2.3 Promotion of democracy and human rights are a pretext for Western hegemony

A recurring element of Chinese official discourse portrays the promotion of democracy and human rights by Western states as a geopolitical instrument rather than a normative commitment. Xi Jinping and senior diplomats argue that some Western states "politicise" and "weaponise" democracy and human rights, using

[72] Thomas des Garets Geddes and Daniel Crain, "Why Chinese Democracy Is Better than Western Democracy According to Tsinghua Prof. Yan Yilong", *Sinification*, 25.5.2023, https://www.sinification.org/p/why-chinese-democracy-is-better-than.

[73] "Time for 'China Threat Theory' Laid to Rest: FM", *Xinhua*, 8.3.2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/08/c_137024880.htm; "Xinhua Commentary: US Should Pivot Away from 'China Threat' Obsession", 3.11.2021, https://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2021-11/03/content_77849539.shtml.

[74] Ibid.

[75] See e.g. Chen Zhuo, "Navigation Warning: Military Training to Be Conducted in South China Sea - China Military", *China Military Online*, 29.7.2025, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16399402.html.

them as a "pretext to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries" and to apply "double standards". MFA statements denounce "hegemony in the name of human rights" and "interference disguised as democracy", framing resolutions, reports or sanctions on Xinjiang, Hong Kong or Tibet as tools of geopolitical containment rather than expression genuine concern.[76]

This narrative is reinforced through a systematic inversion of moral critique. Chinese officials and commentaries routinely highlight the West's histories of slavery, colonialism and genocide, as well as contemporary problems such as systemic racism, refugee mistreatment and pandemic mismanagement, to argue that self-styled "human rights judges" lack moral authority. Within this framing, China and other developing countries are recast not as objects of scrutiny but as victims of an unequal international system in which the "Global North" disciplines the "Global South" through selectively applied norms. Chinese documents and aligned analysis stress that human rights must be pursued "in light of national conditions" and anchored in state sovereignty, non-interference and the right to development. Western efforts to press for civil and political rights, support NGOs or publicise abuses are thus recast as violations of sovereign equality and as attempts to impose a Western model on China and other states, reinforcing a narrative in which China defends a more "democratic" and plural international order against Western ideological hegemony.

This discursive pattern is increasingly projected into third-country contexts when China's interests or partnerships come under criticism, especially in settings where debates about Western influence, democracy promotion, and sovereignty are already politically charged. A case in point is Georgia, where statements by the Chinese Embassy in 2024 coincided with heightened scrutiny of the country's foreign policy orientation and its deepening ties with China following the announcement of a strategic partnership in 2023. As China's growing economic and political presence became an object of criticism among pro-Western actors and external partners, the Embassy portrayed the United States as a hegemonic power that uses democracy promotion and foreign aid as instruments of coercion. US assistance was framed as "bullying under the guise of aid"[77], while the National Endowment for Democracy was accused of acting as a "white glove" for regime change under the pretext of democracy promotion.[78] These claims were subsequently amplified in Georgian political discourse and state-affiliated media.

In this context, Chinese narratives on democracy and human rights aligned with existing local debates about sovereignty and foreign interference, reinforcing portrayals of Western actors as intrusive while casting China as a partner that respects national autonomy. The Georgia case thus illustrates how Chinese discourse can become embedded in local information environments when China's interests come under scrutiny, contributing to broader semantic battles over legitimacy, sovereignty, and democratic governance.

2.2.4 "One China Principle" is international consensus

Over the last decade, Beijing has increasingly resorted to lawfare to advance its "One China Principle" and to shape international understanding on Taiwan. Taiwan, which has functioned as a de facto independent state since 1949 and plays a critical role in Europe's economic and technological security as a key supplier of

[76] "China Is Firmly Committed to a Path of Human Rights Development That Suits Its National Conditions", PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26.9.2021, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zygy/hd/202406/t20240603_11374881.html; Malin Oud, "Human Rights", in *Decoding China Dictionary*, 3nd ed. (The Decoding China Project, 2025), https://decodingchina.eu/key-term/human-rights/.

[77] "The Hypocrisy and Facts of the United States Foreign Aid", Embassy of the PRC in Georgia, 20.4.2024, https://ge.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202404/t20240420_11285495.htm.

[78] "The National Endowment for Democracy:What It Is and What It Does", Embassy of the PRC in Georgia, 9.8.2024, https://ge.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202408/t20240809_11468652.htm.

advanced semiconductors, remains unrecognised as a sovereign state by most countries, including EU member states. From Beijing's perspective, however, the "Taiwan question" (台湾问题) is framed as an exclusively domestic matter: "The Taiwan question is purely China's internal affair" (台湾问题完全是中国内政). In international-law terms, Taiwan meets the criteria of a declarative state – government, people, territory, and capacity to engage in international relations, as evidenced for example by its participation in the WTO – yet Chinese official discourse works systematically to deny and delegitimise any interpretation that treats Taiwan as a separate subject of international law.

A central arena of this semantic battle is the distinction between the PRC's "One-China-Principle" and the EU's "One-China-Policy". Since 2020, EU documents have referred to Taiwan more frequently, highlighting shared values and its economic importance. When the European Parliament adopted its first report on EU-Taiwan political relations in 2021, describing Taiwan as a like-minded partner and condemning Chinese military activities that threaten the status quo,[79] the PRC mission to the EU accused the EP of "blatantly advocating for elevating so-called EU-Taiwan political relations", claimed that "Taiwan is an inseparable part of China" and that this is "a universally acknowledged norm in international relations", and urged the EU to "faithfully honour its commitment to the One-China principle".[80] Notably, the EU and its member states have never committed to the "One China Principle" advanced by Beijing, but to a One China policy. The latter recognises the government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, while maintaining that the status quo in the Taiwan Strait must not be altered unilaterally and that cross-Strait differences should be resolved peacefully by the people on both sides. On this basis, the EU explicitly reserves the right to engage with Taiwan in areas of shared interest, including trade, technology, human rights, climate policy, and participation in international organisations where statehood is not a prerequisite.[81]

Beijing, by contrast, advances the One-China *principle* as a far more expansive and prescriptive claim: that Taiwan has *always* been an inalienable part of Chinese territory and that this position constitutes an established norm of the post-war international order. From this perspective, any form of official exchange, political engagement, or even symbolic recognition of Taiwan by EU institutions is framed not as a policy choice but as a violation of an allegedly binding international consensus. The recurring PRC protests against EU-Taiwan contacts thus function as a semantic and normative move that seeks to collapse the EU's deliberately flexible One-China *policy* into China's absolutist One-China *principle*, thereby narrowing the space for legitimate cooperation with Taiwan and recasting EU actions as infringements on China's sovereignty rather than expressions of European autonomy.

Parliamentary and political exchanges with Taiwan are thus routinely framed as violations of the "One China principle" and, by extension, of the political foundations of China-EU relations. When members of the EP Special Committee on Foreign Interference and Disinformation (INGE) planned a visit to Taiwan in November 2021, the PRC mission argued that:

> *The One-China principle is a universally recognized norm in international relations and an international consensus. It is also the political foundation for the establishment of diplomatic relations and the development of bilateral relations between China and the EU.*

[79] Justyna Szczudlik, "The EU-China Battle of Narratives on Taiwan", in *Unpacking Beijing's Narrative on Taiwan*, ed. Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy (Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2023), https://www.isdp.eu/publication/unpacking-beijings-narrative-on-taiwan/.

[80] "Remarks by Spokesperson of the Chinese Mission to the EU on the European Parliament's Report on Taiwan", 21.10.2021, https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/fyrjh/202110/t20211021_9604732.htm.

[81] Josep Borrell, "EU-China Relations: A Candid Exchange on Our Differences", European External Action Service, 20.10.2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-relations-candid-exchange-our-differences_en.

> *Not having official exchanges in any form with Taiwan authorities is an essential part of the adherence to the One-China principle. The European Parliament is an official body of the EU. If its committee sends MEPs to visit Taiwan, that would seriously violate the EU's commitment to the One-China policy, damage China's core interest and undermine the healthy development of China-EU relations.*[82]

Similar language was used when the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) invited Republic of China (ROC) Vice-President Hsiao Bi-khim to speak at an event hosted in the European Parliament in 2025, with the PRC mission again stressing that the "One-China Principle" is the "prerequisite and foundation" for China-EU diplomatic relations and urging the EU to stop "sending wrong signals to 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces".[83]

As a further narrative move, Beijing portrayed the European Parliament's September 2022 resolution on "The situation in the Taiwan Strait"[84] – adopted in response to the PRC's unprecedented military intimidation and large-scale live-fire exercises following U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan – as hypocritical:

> *The resolution stressed that the status quo in the Taiwan Strait must not be unilaterally changed. However, the basic fact is that the US keeps violating its commitments in the three China-US joint communiqués and doing its utmost to undermine and pressurize China, exploiting Taiwan as a convenient tool. […] If the European Parliament truly hopes to maintain the status quo of the Taiwan Strait, it should first stop the US and the Taiwan separatist forces from violating and challenging the one-China principle.*[85]

2.2.5 Taiwan is the last unresolved puzzle piece of post-World War II settlement

In an effort to rewrite history, Chinese official discourse increasingly anchors the Taiwan question in the post-Second World War settlement, presenting Taiwan as having always been part of China and as the last unresolved issue of the post-war international order. During his visit to Germany in May 2023, then Foreign Minister Qin Gang visited Cecilienhof Palace, the site of the 1945 Potsdam Conference, and wrote in the guest book:

> *Uphold the post-war international order, promote world peace and prosperity, and realise China's national reunification.*[86]

In a speech at the site, he argued that the Potsdam Declaration reaffirmed the 1943 Cairo Declaration, which required Japan to return territories seized from China, including Taiwan, framing this as a key outcome of the

[82] "Spokesperson of the Chinese Mission to the EU Speaks on a Question Concerning the Planned Visit of MEPs to Taiwan", 27.10.2021, https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/fyrjh/202110/t20211027_10170681.htm.
[83] "Spokesperson of the Chinese Mission to the EU Speaks on a Question Concerning the European Parliament Allowing Leading 'Taiwan Independence' Figures Such as Hsiao Bi-Khim to Carry out 'Taiwan Independence' Separatist Activities in Its Building", Mission of the PRC to the European Union, 8.11.2025, https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/mh/202511/t20251108_11749510.htm.
[84] European Parliament, "The Situation in the Strait of Taiwan", 15.9.2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0331_EN.pdf.
[85] "Spokesperson of Chinese Mission to the EU Speaks on a Question Concerning European Parliament's Resolution on Taiwan", 16.9.2022, https://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/fyrjh/202209/t20220916_10767067.htm.
[86] "Qin Gang: Post-War International Order Must Be Preserved; China's National Reunification Must Be Realized", PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 10, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202305/t20230511_11075275.html.

global anti-fascist struggle and accusing the United States of selectively invoking a "rules-based order" while undermining the very documents it had drafted by supporting "Taiwan independence". He argued that the Potsdam Declaration reaffirmed the 1943 Cairo Declaration, which stipulated that territories seized by Japan from China, including Taiwan, were to be returned after the war – framing this as a key outcome of the global anti-fascist struggle, in which China had borne enormous human costs. Qin accused the United States of selectively invoking the rules-based international order while disregarding the Potsdam Declaration it had helped draft, thereby supporting "Taiwan independence" activities and undermining both the post-war order and China's sovereignty and security – an outcome he described as unacceptable to the Chinese people. Within this narrative, Taiwan independence is cast not only as a challenge to China but as a violation of historical justice and a threat to the international order itself. This symbolic use of Potsdam follows a well-established pattern: from Jiang Zemin and Xi Jinping to Wang Yi and Qin Gang, senior Chinese leaders have repeatedly used the site to reinforce the claim that China fought alongside the Allies, that the Potsdam Declaration mandated Taiwan's return to China, and that the One China principle is therefore embedded in the post-war international order. Notably, prior to the Cairo Declaration – which was signed by the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek – Chinese Communists had supported the right of national self-determination for territories occupied by Japan, including Taiwan, on internationalist grounds.[87] In 1943, they nevertheless accepted the Cairo Declaration, most likely because of their subordination to the Communist International (Comintern): opposing it would have meant openly opposing Stalin and the Soviet Union, which had endorsed the declaration.

To advance the narratives around Taiwan beyond formal diplomatic channels, Beijing increasingly relies on the previously introduced strategy of "borrowing boats to go to sea". Rather than speaking only through state organs, core historical claims are amplified by ostensibly independent voices, including Chinese state media journalists and commentators writing in a private capacity on platforms such as Substack. A notable example is *Beijing Scroll*, a Substack founded by a Xinhua journalist and research fellow at the Xinhua Institute, which publishes pieces co-written by Xinhua staff and framed as offering perspectives that "differ from the typical Western perspectives". Posts such as "Decoding UNGA Resolution 2758 and Taiwan's Status under International Law"[88] – famed as a direct response to a German Marshall Fund report challenging Beijing's reading of Resolution 2758[89] – and "How Does China's Victory in 1945 Still Define the Taiwan Question?"[90] link Taiwan to the "80th anniversary of the Allied victory in World War II and of the Chinese nation's triumph in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression" – as Chinas has framed the Victory Day celebrations in September 2025:

> *To grasp why Taiwan has come to be seen as a "question", one must understand that, in the final stage of World War II, a series of documents of international law required Japan to return Taiwan to China. After winning the war in 1945, China had already restored its sovereignty over Taiwan. This was a consensus among the Allies, but Cold War divisions*

[87] Frank S. T. Hsiao and Lawrence R. Sullivan, "The Chinese Communist Party and the Status of Taiwan, 1928-1943", *Pacific Affairs* 52, no. 3 (1979): 446–67, https://doi.org/10.2307/2757657; Zhou Enlai 周恩来, "Nation and State above All" (民族至上与国家至上), *Xinhua Daily* (新华日报), 15. and 22.6.1941, https://www.marxists.org/chinese/zhouenlai/349.htm.

[88] Ren Ke et al., "Decoding UNGA Resolution 2758 and Taiwan's Status under International Law", *Beijing Scroll (Substack)*, 19.5.2025, https://www.beijingscroll.com/p/decoding-unga-resolution-2758-and-bbe.

[89] Jacques deLisle and Bonnie Glaser, "Exposing the PRC's Distortion of UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 to Press Its Claim Over Taiwan", German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 2024, https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/GMF_UNGA%20Res.%202758_April%202024%20Report.pdf.

[90] Jiang Jiang et al., "How Does China's Victory in 1945 Still Define the Taiwan Question?", Substack, *Beijing Scroll*, September 2, 2025, https://www.beijingscroll.com/p/how-does-chinas-victory-in-1945-still.

> *and geopolitics in recent years have obscured that reality for some – and even led to its outright denial. […] The phrase "status undetermined", an invention tailored by the United States and its allies to Cold War needs, laid the groundwork for the legal ambiguity. […] China's continued rise has caused unease among some Western nations still clinging to a Cold War mentality, leading their policies toward China to increasingly favor containment over engagement. Thus, the Taiwan issue has become a strategic leverage point for counterbalancing China. In particular, the United States deliberately maintains ambiguity on the Taiwan question – the so-called "strategic ambiguity" – seeking to constrain China. […] China will hold activities around Oct. 25 to mark the 80th anniversary of Taiwan's restoration to China from Japanese occupation, as part of the events for the 80th anniversary of the victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War. The anniversary is more than commemoration. It is a reminder that the Taiwan question arose when the Chinese nation was weak and divided, and it will be resolved when the Chinese nation's rejuvenation is complete. The only question that remains is how.*[91]

The passage is reproduced at length because it makes unusually explicit the full narrative logic through which Beijing links historical interpretation, international law, post-war order, and national rejuvenation into a coherent account of the Taiwan issue, and because it illustrates how this narrative is deliberately projected beyond formal diplomatic channels through ostensibly independent commentary designed to shape international debate and influence foreign audiences.

2.2.6 Renaming Tibet away - "Tibet" is a colonial term that should be replaced with "Xizang"

Since 2019, Beijing has intensified a semantic battle over Tibet by systematically replacing the internationally familiar term "Tibet" with the word "Xizang", the pinyin romanisation of the Mandarin word for Tibet (西藏) in English-language official documents and international-facing communication. Since 2019, Chinese state media outlets have been using Xizang rather than Tibet, and in October 2023, the United Front Work Department (UFWD) declared that "there is no more Tibet in the official documents of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs".[92] According to the UFWD, the term "Tibet" is misleading because it refers not only to the Tibet Autonomous Region but also to Tibetan-inhabited areas in Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan – thereby, in Beijing's view, granting the Tibetan community, including actors advocating independence or statehood, an unduly expansive geographical frame. Chinese officials had already voiced concerns as early as 2014 that the continued use of the term could politically benefit the exiled leader, the Dalai Lama.[93] This shift

[91] Ibid.

[92] Allyn Gaestel, "What's in a Name? Tibet, Xizang, and the Politics of Erasure", *Inkstick*, 22.1.2025, https://inkstickmedia.com/whats-in-a-name-tibet-xizang-and-the-politics-of-erasure/.

[93] Ibid. As reported by the *South China Morning Post*, the change in the nomenclature emerged from the 7th Beijing International Seminar on Tibetan Studies, held from 14 to 16 August 2023 in Beijing, with Professor Wang Linping, a scholar affiliated with the College of Marxism at Harbin Engineering University was a prominent voice behind this proposal. He argued that the term "Tibet" misrepresents the region's geographical boundaries and, in doing so, contributes to misunderstandings in international discourse. "Xizang" – the Mandarin Chinese romanisation of Tibet – was for Wang a more accurate designation, one that, in his view, better reflects the region's actual territorial scope. The seminar's official report made this logic explicit. It stressed that the globally prevalent use of the term "Tibet" refers to a much broader area than the administratively defined Tibet Autonomous Region, extending into parts of what are officially designated as Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan provinces. See: "Chinese Academics Want Tibet to Be Known as Xizang to Help 'Reconstruct' Image", *South China Morning Post*, 17.8.2023,

was reflected in the titles of successive Tibet-related white papers, with the 2019 document titled Democratic Reform in Tibet – Sixty Years On and the 2023 paper Communist Party of China Policies on the Governance of Xizang in the New Era.

Since 2023, Beijing has also encouraged foreign audiences to adopt the term "Xizang", or alternatively formulations such as "China's Tibet" or "Western China". In both internal and external communication, Chinese authorities now frame this terminological shift as an act of decolonisation, arguing that the name "Tibet" is of foreign origin and lacks local roots. Rather than constituting a genuine decolonial move, however, this rhetoric repurposes the language of decolonisation to legitimise and obscure China's own colonial project in the region. For Tibetan exile communities, the replacement of "Tibet" with "Xizang" constitutes a deliberate attempt to erase Tibet as a political and cultural signifier and to narrow the imagined geography of Tibetan identity.

These concerns have also taken on a transnational dimension. In 2024, two major French public museums – the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac and the Musée Guimet – became the focus of controversy after being accused of accommodating Beijing's preferred terminology in their treatment of Tibetan material.[94] At the Musée du quai Branly, the term "Tibet" was removed from the museum's catalogues of Tibetan objects and replaced with "Xizang Autonomous Region", the official Chinese designation. Around the same time, the Musée Guimet – Europe's largest collection of Asian art replaced the toponym "Tibet" in its gallery spaces with the more ambiguous label "Himalayan world", effectively removing the term from rooms previously dedicated to Tibetan culture. The name "Tibet" had also been omitted from the museum's *Tang China* exhibition, which features works from more than thirty Chinese museums and was reportedly financed in large part by Chinese institutions.[95] These changes coincided with the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of Franco-Chinese diplomatic relations and with Chinese leader Xi Jinping's state visit to Paris in May 2024. While museum officials have framed the adjustments as curatorial or scholarly decisions, critics have interpreted them as concrete manifestations of China's broader semantic and narrative strategies extending into European cultural institutions.

This was not the first such case in France. A few years earlier, the History Museum of Nantes had encountered similar pressures while preparing an exhibition on Genghis Khan. According to museum officials, Chinese partners made the loan of objects conditional on the removal of Genghis Khan's name, as well as references to Mongolian history and culture, in favour of a revised national narrative.[96] The museum's director refused these conditions and instead chose to rely on collections from Mongolian museums and private lenders. His decision led to the organization of a highly scientific exhibition in 2023 without China's participation.[97]

Also in 2024, a similar controversy unfolded at the British Museum in London. In its Silk Roads exhibition, which opened in September 2024 and examined cultural exchanges between Asia and Europe from 500 to 1000 CE,

https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3231421/chinese-academics-want-tibet-be-known-xizang-help-reconstruct-image.

[94] Collectif, "French museums are bowing to China's demands to rewrite history and erase peoples" *Le Monde*, 3.9.2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/09/03/french-museums-are-bowing-to-china-s-demands-to-rewrite-history-and-erase-peoples_6724633_23.html.

[95] "Paris Museum Accused of 'erasing' Tibet under Pressure from China", RFI, 3.1.2025, https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20250103-french-museum-accused-of-erasing-tibet-under-pressure-from-china.

[96] Sylvie Kerviel, "Genghis Khan exhibition defies Chinese censorship at Nantes history museum", *Le Monde*, 8.12.2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/culture/article/2022/12/08/genghis-khan-defies-chinese-censorship-at-nantes-h-museum_6007034_30.html.

[97] Collectif, "French museums are bowing to China's demands to rewrite history and erase peoples".

Tibetan objects were initially labelled as originating from the "Xizang Autonomous Region".[98] This choice of terminology prompted protests from Tibetan community representatives and human rights organisations in the United Kingdom, who criticised the museum for adopting language they regarded as politically loaded and historically misleading. Following sustained public pressure, the state-funded museum removed the term "Xizang" and replaced it with "Tibetan Autonomous Region". Critics, however, argued that this revision did little to address the underlying issue, as it continued to mirror China's official administrative framing and left Tibet's broader historical and geographical identity unacknowledged.[99] The Chinese embassy in France responded with a long post on their website with "facts" on why the name "Xizang" was correct, stating i.a. that

> *the name of local administrative units is the sovereign right of each country. […] The word "Tibet" has seriously misled the international community. […] True to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of others, the Chinese government advocates cooperation between cultural institutions that respect historical and cultural traditions as well as the laws and policies in force of each country, without intervening in the details of cooperation.* ***However, cooperation in the field of exhibition must be carried out in accordance with the will of the party providing the collections to be exhibited****, which is an event of sincerity and mutual trust, as well as the basis and the precondition for successful cooperation.*[100]

While the embassy did not officially confirm Chinese exhibition loans, the final sentence – stating that exhibition cooperation must accord with the will of the party providing the collections as a prerequisite for sincerity, mutual trust, and successful cooperation – implicitly confirms a policy of conditioning cultural exchanges and exhibition loans on political and terminological compliance.

According to Tenzin Dorjee and James Leibold, the push to replace "Tibet" with "Xizang" reflects Beijing's long-standing concern with the international politics of naming and reputation.[101] Over the past decades, "Tibet" has become closely associated with transnational activism and claims to self-determination, rendering the term politically charged in global discourse. Chinese officials have long recognised that military control and administrative incorporation alone are insufficient to secure international legitimacy, and that struggles over international public opinion are central to the issue. Under Xi Jinping, this insight has been translated into a broader strategy aimed at strengthening China's international discourse power, including efforts to depoliticise Tibet through terminological shifts, narrative management, and the projection of carefully curated images of stability and prosperity. The promotion of "Xizang" thus functions not merely as a linguistic adjustment, but as an attempt to narrow the range of meanings associated with Tibet and to neutralise the political claims historically attached to the name itself.

[98] Loboe Socktsang and Tenzin Pema, "Tibetans Demand Apology from the British Museum for Use of 'Xizang'", Radio Free Asia, 24.12.2024, https://www.rfa.org/english/tibet/2024/12/24/tibet-british-museum-xizang/.
[99] "British Museum Makes Partial Concession in 'Xizang' Row", *Phayul*, 25.2.2025, https://www.phayul.com/2025/02/25/51814/.
[100] "New Explanatory Elements on the Word Xizang, the Official Name of the Chinese Region Concerned" (Nouveaux éléments d'explication sur le mot Xizang, appellation officielle de la région chinoise concernée), PRC Embassy to France, 9.11.2024, https://fr.china-embassy.gov.cn/fra/zfzj/202412/t20241218_11496183.htm.
[101] Tenzin Dorjee and James Leibold, "Beijing Wants to Erase Tibet's Name. Don't Let Them", *Journal of Democracy*, May 2025, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/beijing-wants-to-erase-tibets-name-dont-let-them/.

2.2.7 Europe should take a "rational" and "pragmatic" stance in cooperation with China

In Chinese messaging toward European audiences, a recurring narrative is that Europe should adopt a "rational" and "pragmatic" stance in its cooperation with China. Officials and state-aligned commentators urge the EU to develop "an objective and rational understanding of China" and to pursue a "more positive and pragmatic" China policy, instead of "amplifying differences" or "securitising" normal economic ties. This language positions China-EU relations as fundamentally about mutually beneficial cooperation and interdependence, with competition and disagreements framed as secondary and manageable if approached calmly and technically. One such example is the following statement by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi at China-EU High-level Strategic Dialogue on 3 July 2025:

> *The historical and cultural backgrounds and values of China and the EU are different, but differences should not be seen as reasons to view each other as adversaries, nor should disagreements lead to confrontation. […] The two sides should respect and learn from each other, pursue common development and progress, and make new contributions to human civilisation. The Chinese side hopes that the EU will truly develop an objective and rational understanding of China and pursue a more positive and pragmatic policy toward China.*[102]

Pragmatism in this context means to focus on shared interests such as trade, scientific exchange, and global challenges, while setting aside contentious issues such as human rights, security concerns or geopolitical competition. The implicit message is that failure to "properly handle" these differences will damage the relationship and cause economic harm.[103] Calls for "rational" and "pragmatic" engagement implicitly criticise moves such as "de-risking", anti-subsidy investigations or tighter investment screening as ideological, emotional or externally driven, often hinting at undue U.S. influence. Chinese officials link a "rational and pragmatic" approach to Europe's own interest in "strategic autonomy", urging European leaders to resist "Cold War mentality", avoid "politicizing economic issues", and handle frictions through dialogue rather than "trade arsenals" or alignment with U.S. containment policies.[104]

[102] "China and the European Union Hold the 13th Round of High-Level Strategic Dialogue_Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China", PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1.11.2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202507/t20250703_11664496.html.

[103] "Pragmatic", in *Decoding China Dictionary*, 3nd ed. (The Decoding China Project, 2025), https://decodingchina.eu/qualifier/pragmatic/.

[104] Xinhua, "China Urges EU to Pursue More Positive, Pragmatic Policy toward China", State Council Information Office, 10.6.2025, http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/2025-07/10/content_117971208.html; "Wang Yi Holds Talks with German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul", PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8.12.2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./wjbzhd/202512/t20251209_11769683.html; Xinhua, "China, EU Are Partners, Not Rivals: FM Spokesperson", China's Diplomacy in the New Era, 2.12.2023, https://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2023-12/02/content_116853656.shtml; Li Yang, "EU Should Handle China Relations with Due Rationality and Pragmatism", *China Daily*, 17.12.2025, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202512/17/WS6941f16aa310d6866eb2efe9.html.

3. Russia – Strategic Thinking and Key Narratives

3.1 The Russian Case

Where Chapter 2 reconstructs China's discourse as the primary case, this chapter uses Russia as a structured comparator to highlight how a different authoritarian actor engages in its own semantic battles and narrative contestations around similar concepts (democracy, sovereignty, order, threat). Like Beijing, Kremlin feels under attack from the "West". Russian government officials have consistently stated that the West engages in an "information war" that seeks to undermine, weaken, and ultimately destroy the Russian state, in part by spreading information that erodes Russian "traditional" values.[105] Since the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian government officials and pro-Kremlin experts have used the terms "de-sovereignisation" (де-суверенизация)[106], demonisation (демонизация)[107] or "cancellation" [as in cancel culture - "отменить"][108] – while Russia foreign policy documents and doctrine highlight the quest to *preserve* Russia's "worthy" place in the world.[109]

To understand what drives Russian semantic battles and narrative contestations in foreign policy, this section examines the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept and related core doctrinal documents as central empirical sources, since they offer an authoritative and periodically updated codification of how the Kremlin situates Russia in the international order, conceptualises the international information environment, identifies adversarial narratives (especially alleged Western information threats), and defines the strategic role of information, narratives, and meaning-making as instruments of state power and tools for pursuing external objectives.

Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 marked a significant narrative shift, in which long-standing Russian grievances – previously articulated more implicitly in the first Foreign Policy Concept of the Putin era in 2000 – were translated into an explicit and openly confrontational narrative of contestation, reframing Russia's relationship with the Western-led international order in clearly oppositional terms.[110] Putin accused the United States and other Western States of undermining global security, pursuing a NATO expansion that was directed against Russia, and interfering in Russia's domestic affairs through covert operations by foreign funded NGOs. Responding to critical questions regarding repressions against NGOs and killing of journalists in Russia, Putin responded with classical delegitimisation and diversion ("Whataboutism") techniques:

[105] Scott Radnitz, Revealing Schemes: The Politics of Conspiracy in Russia and the Post-Soviet Region (Oxford University Press, 2021); Ilya Yablokov, Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World (Polity, 2018).
[106] "How the West Is Trying to 'Destroy' Russia and Why It Is Failing – a Large-Scale Study by Political Scientists from Sevastopol State University and MGIMO University" (Как Запад пытается «развалить» Россию и почему это не удается – масштабное исследование политологов СевГУ и МГИМО), Government of the Republic of Crimea (Правительство Республики Крым), 29.3.2024, https://rk.gov.ru/structure/5b88c0d9-d779-4047-8686-58d74fe31418.
[107] Farina Mirko (Фарина Мирко), "The Image of Russia in the Eyes of the West: What Is It Like?" (Образ России в глазах Запада: какой он?), Roskongress (Росконгресс), 23.9.2024, https://roscongress.org/materials/obraz-rossii-v-glazakh-zapada-kakoy-on/?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F.
[108] "The West Is Trying to 'Cancel' Russia" (Запад пытается «отменить» Россию), Expert club (Экспертный клуб), accessed December 27, 2025, https://expert-club.online/news/zapad-pytaetsya-otmenit-rossiyu.
[109] See e.g. "Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", 12.2.2013: §39n. https://beijing.mid.ru/en/countries/rossiya/kontseptsiya_vneshney_politiki_rossii/.,
[110] President of Russia, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy", 1002. 2007, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034.

> *Financing from foreign governments, including within governmental campaigns, proceeds through non-governmental organisations. And who is happy about this? Is this normal democracy? It is secret financing. Hidden from society. Where is the democracy here? Can you tell me? No! You can't tell me and you never will be able to. Because there is no democracy here, there is simply one state exerting influence on another. […]*
>
> *As to journalists then yes, this represents an important and difficult problem. And, incidentally, journalists are not only killed in Russia, but in other countries as well. Where are most journalists killed? You are an expert and probably know in which country the most journalists died in, say, the last year and a half? The largest number of journalists were killed in Iraq.*

The Foreign Policy Concept of 2008 which followed Putin's Munich speech is highly concerned with Russia's international status and speaks of "negative trends emerged" that Russia's foreign policy has to consider.[111] It defines among the key objectives

> *to ensure national security, to preserve and strengthen its sovereignty and territorial integrity, to achieve strong positions of authority in the world community that best meet the interests of the Russian Federation as one of influential centres in the modern world, and which are necessary for the growth of its political, economic, intellectual and spiritual potential;*
>
> *to create favourable external conditions for the modernization of Russia*
>
> *to influence global processes to ensure formation of a just and democratic world order*
>
> *to assist in eliminating the existing hotbeds of tension and conflicts in the regions adjacent to the Russian Federation*
>
> *to ensure stability of the international position of the country*
>
> *to provide comprehensive protection of rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad*
>
> *to promote an objective image of the Russian Federation globally as a democratic state*
>
> *to promote and propagate, in foreign States, the Russian language and Russian peoples' culture constituting a unique contribution to cultural and civilational diversity of the contemporary world and to the development of an inter civilational partnership*

The 2008 Concept further links Russia's international status to internal development, underscoring that sustained economic growth, institutional reform – including "constitutional system, rule of law and democratic institutions, realization of human rights and freedoms" – and rising living standards are essential preconditions for preserving Russia's position and authority in the international system. Domestic modernization is thus framed not only as a socio-economic objective, but as a prerequisite for maintaining Russia's standing as an influential global actor. However, within the logic of the Concept, "constitutional system, rule of law and democratic institutions" clearly to not refer to liberal-democratic standards of

[111] "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation", President of Russia, 12.01.2008, http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116.

accountability and political competition, but to regime security: in line with the confrontational tone articulated in Munich, the 2008 Concept identifies external threats primarily in terms of foreign policies that "undermine sovereignty", by attempts to contest the legitimacy of sovereign states' roles, and by asymmetries in global power. Within this farming, Russia expresses concern about "attempts to use force […] or threaten to use force, in order to curb sovereignty of states, or to interfere into their domestic affairs" as well as the destabilizing effect of the "monopoly on globalization processes" held by certain actors. "Human rights and freedoms", in turn, are not understood in a liberal-individual sense, but as defence of the "Russian world" (*russkiy mir* русский мир) – "protection of rights and legitimate interests of the Russian citizens and compatriots living abroad […] the multimillion Russian diaspora – the Russian world", the preservation of the "the ethnic and cultural identity of the Russian diaspora and its links with its historic motherland" and the promotion of the Russian language.[112] According to Putin, the "Russian world" exists independent of state borders:

> *This is Ancient Rus', the Muscovite Tsardom, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union; this is contemporary Russia, which is restoring, strengthening, and multiplying its sovereignty as a world power. The Russian world unites all those who feel a spiritual bond with our Motherland, who consider themselves bearers of the Russian language, history, and culture, regardless even of national or religious affiliation.*
>
> *Это Древняя Русь, Московское царство, Российская империя, Советский Союз, это современная Россия, которая возвращает, укрепляет и умножает свой суверенитет как мировая держава. Русский мир объединяет всех, кто чувствует духовную связь с нашей Родиной, кто считает себя носителем русского языка, истории, культуры независимо даже от национальной или религиозной принадлежности.*[113]

This externally oriented and collective understanding of rights intersects with the 2008 Concept's emphasis on Eurasian integration, which situates the near abroad as a key space in which cultural, political, and economic logics converge. By highlighting the importance of economic integration with neighbouring states and participation in the Eurasian Economic Community and Customs Union, the Concept affirms Russia's intention to deepen cooperation in precisely those regions where Russian-speaking populations and diaspora communities are concentrated. In this sense, the protection of the "Russian world" and the pursuit of regional economic integration are articulated as complementary elements of a broader strategy aimed at securing Russia's stability, influence, and economic security in its immediate neighbourhood. Elements of this logic were already visible in Russia's justification of the 2008 war with Georgia. From 2014 on, the concept of the "Russian world" was used by Putin explicitly to justify the invasion of Ukraine.

The 2008 Concept further codifies several narrative premises that became recurrent points of reference in Russia's semantic battles and narrative contestations. First, it frames the it frames the international system as being in a transitional post-Cold War moment characterised by "contradictory trends" rooted in competing interpretations of the Cold War's end:

[112] As "diaspora" as outlined by Suslov, that is by many accounts, is neither Russian, nor a diaspora at all. Mikhail Suslov, "'Russian World' Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of 'Spheres of Influence'", *Geopolitics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 330–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921.

[113] "Plenary Session of the World Russian People's Council" (Пленарное заседание Всемирного русского народного собора), President of Russia (Президент России), 28.11.2023, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72863.

> *The contradictory trends determining the current state of international relations are a result of the transitional period in their development. Those trends are reflecting differences in understanding of a genuine meaning and consequences of the end of the Cold War.*[114]

Second, it elevates geopolitical competition into a civilisational rivalry between "different value systems and development models", while simultaneously insisting on "universal democratic and market economy principles":

> *It is for the first time in the contemporary history that global competition is acquiring a civilisational dimension which suggests competition between different value systems and development models within the framework of universal democratic and market economy principles.*[115]

Third, it asserts an emerging plurality of civilisations – "cultural and civilational diversity" – as a structural feature of the new order:

> *As the constraints of the bipolar confrontation are being overcome, the cultural and civilisational diversity of the modern world is increasingly in evidence.*[116]

Fourth, it casts destabilisation as the outcome of Western dominance and unilateralism:

> *The reaction to the prospect of loss by the historic West of its monopoly in global processes finds its expression, in particular, in the continued political and psychological policy of "containing" Russia, including the use of a selective approach to history, for those purposes, first of all as regards the World War Two and the postwar period.*[117]

The "historic West" is portrayed as seeking to retain a "monopoly in global processes", expressing this through "political and psychological" containment of Russia and through "selective" historical interpretation, while "unilateral action" is depicted as producing insecurity, arms races, and "tensions in intercivilisational relations".[118] Taken together, these premises identify the key discursive fault lines along which later Russian messaging repeatedly contests legitimacy, historical interpretation, and the normative foundations of international order.

While largely preserving continuity with its predecessor in terms of core objectives – sovereignty, integration, and multipolarity – the 2013 revision of the Foreign Policy Concept[119] introduced notable shifts in narrative framing and emphasis, reflecting Russia's interpretation of global developments such as the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the "Arab Spring".[120] The 2013 Concept paints the picture of a civilisationally competitive and unstable international environment in which "Western countries [are] trying to preserve their

[114] Foreign Policy Concept 2008, sec. II, par. 9.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Foreign Policy Concept 2008, sec. II, par. 10.
[117] Foreign Policy Concept 2008, sec. II, par. 11.
[118] Foreign Policy Concept 2008, sec. II, par. 15.
[119] "Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", 12.02.2013, https://beijing.mid.ru/en/countries/rossiya/kontseptsiya_vneshney_politiki_rossii/.
[120] Andrew Monaghan, "The New Russian Foreign Policy Concept: Evolving Continuity", *Chatham House*, April 2013, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0413pp_monaghan.pdf.

traditional positions"[121], attempt "to manage crises through unilateral sanctions and other coercive measures"[122], and make "unlawful use of 'soft power' and human rights concepts to exert political pressure on sovereign states, interfere in their internal affairs, destabilize their political situation, manipulate public opinion, including under the pretext of financing cultural and human rights projects abroad"[123]. Similarly to China, Russia situates these practices within an entrenched narrative framework that casts American "democracy promotion" policies and human rights rhetoric as merely a tool to interfere in other states' internal affairs. Withing this framing, it views Russian national identity, cultural values, and what the document calls "traditional moral and spiritual values" under attack through what it perceives as foreign attempts to apply human-rights rhetoric, "non-governmental organisations", or civil society activism in ways that interfere with sovereignty, thus requiring protection. In response, the Concept commits Russia to

> *take necessary measures to ensure national and international information security, prevent political, economic and social threats to the state's security that emerge in information space [and] prevent [information and communication technologies] from being used for military and political purposes […] including actions aimed at interference in the internal affairs.*[124]

Here, for the first time, "soft power" (мягкая сила) is explicitly articulated as a tool of Russian foreign policy – defined as a broad set of instruments that includes civil society, information and communication, and humanitarian tools – clearly to counter what the concept articulates as the "unlawful use" of soft power and human right by others.

More explicitly than the 2008 Concept, the 2013 Concept advances a narrative of Russian exceptionalism, emphasising "the unique role our country has been playing over centuries as a counterbalance in international affairs and the development of global civilisation".[125] This self-positioning is coupled with a normative claim to act as a stabilising force against "extremism, radicalization, intolerance, discrimination and division for ethnic, confessional, linguistic, cultural and other reasons", thereby linking Russia's international role to the defence of order, cohesion, and civilisational balance.[126] At the same time, the Concept places markedly greater emphasis on image-building and communicative capacity as instruments of foreign policy. It assigns priority to "working to establish Russia's positive image worthy of the high status of its culture, education, science, sports achievements, [and] the level of civil society development", while explicitly calling for the improvement of "the application of 'soft power'" and the development of appropriate regulatory frameworks.[127] This focus is operationalised through a strengthened commitment to "public diplomacy" – meaning contesting Western narratives of Russia: providing the "broad world public with full and accurate information" about Russia's positions and achievements, developing "effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad", reinforcing the international role of Russian mass media with state support, and countering "information threats to its sovereignty and security".[128]

[121] Foreign Policy Concept 2013, §6.
[122] Foreign Policy Concept 2013, §15.
[123] Foreign Policy Concept 2013, §20.
[124] Foreign Policy Concept 2013, §32h.
[125] Foreign Policy Concept 2013, §25.
[126] Foreign Policy Concept 2013, §32u.
[127] Foreign Policy Concept 2013, §39n.
[128] Foreign Policy Concept 2013, §41.

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, presented a more self-confident and explicitly post-Western vision of Russia's international role.[129] Its first pages affirm that one of Russia's main objectives is "to consolidate the Russian Federation's position as a centre of influence in today's world."[130] It describes Russian diplomacy as "assertive and independent",[131] while insisting that "Russia's foreign policy is open and predictable. It is characterized by consistency and continuity and reflects the unique role Russia has played for centuries as a counterbalance in international affairs and the development of global civilisation."[132]The Concept continues to link foreign policy goals with economic modernisation and diversification. It calls for "diversifying its exports, and specifically by increasing the volume of non-resource-based exports, and expanding the geography of foreign economic ties",[133] and emphasizes cooperation in areas such as energy, food security, trade, transport, and technology – seeking to ensure that "Russia's interests and approaches are taken into consideration in an adequate manner when devising a common position on the most urgent aspects of international development".[134] The 2016 text also institutionalizes the information dimension of Russian foreign policy. In a dedicated section titled *Information Support for Foreign Policy Activities*, it declares:

> *Delivery to the international community of unbiased information about Russia's perspective on key international issues, its foreign policy initiatives […] and Russia's cultural and research achievements is an important element of foreign policy activities of the Russian Federation.*[135]

It pledges to "bolster the standing of Russian mass media and communication tools in the global information space and convey Russia's perspective on international process to a wider international community",[136] while also vowing "to counter threats to its information security. New information and communication technology is used to this end".[137]This dual emphasis, i.e., proactive promotion of Russia's image abroad and defensive resistance to "information threats", embodies a doctrine of information sovereignty that had, by 2016, become integral to the Russian understanding of global power competition.

In the regional sphere, the Concept affirms a commitment "to pursue neighbourly relations with adjacent States, assist them in eliminating the existing and preventing the emergence of the new hotbeds of tension and conflicts on their territory",[138] while noting that "Russia is interested in developing a whole variety of political, economic, cultural and spiritual ties with Ukraine".[139] Such phrasing reflects the lingering aspiration to maintain influence in the post-Soviet space through cooperative rather than overtly confrontational means, at least at the level of official discourse.

[129] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)", https://www.russiamatters.org/sites/default/files/media/files/Foreign%20Policy%20Concept%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20(approved%20by%20President%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20Vladimir%20Putin%20on%20November%2030,%202016)%20-%20Asset%20Publisher%20-%20The%20Ministry%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation.pdf.
[130] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §3c.
[131] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §21.
[132] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §22.
[133] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §40c.
[134] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §40a.
[135] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §§46-48.
[136] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §3j.
[137] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §47.
[138] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §3f.
[139] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §59.

At the normative level, the Concept reiterates Russia's adherence to sovereignty and non-interference. It seeks to

> *counter politically motivated and self-interested attempts by some States to arbitrarily interpret the fundamental international legal norms and principles such as non-use of force or threat of force, peaceful settlement of international disputes, [and] respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of States […] counter attempts to interfere in the domestic affairs of States.* [140]

Finally, the 2016 Concept extends Russia's foreign policy horizons toward the Global South. It pledges to "expand multidimensional interaction with African States both in bilateral and multilateral settings by improving political dialogue and promoting mutually beneficial trade and economic ties",[141] while affirming that "Russia views sustainable socio-economic development of States as an essential prerequisite for shaping an international system that would be more efficient and crisis-resilient."[142]

The 2023 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation[143] portrays Russia as an innocent victim of a "collective West" that for years has been pursuing an "anti-Russian policy",[144] and has now allegedly unleashed a "new type of hybrid war" against it, using the Russian military assault on Ukraine as a mere "pretext".[145] The document refers to the Russian assault in an extremely euphemistic way, as "measures adopted by the Russian Federation in defence of its existential interests in the Ukrainian direction".[146] This is the only direct reference to Russia's war against Ukraine in the entire document of over forty pages. According to the Concept, the reason for the West's "anti-Russian policy" is the very fact that Russia is pursuing an "independent foreign policy", which supposedly poses a threat to the alleged "Western hegemony".[147] It defines it as a national interest and foreign policy goal "to ensure that Russia is perceived abroad objectively [and] consolidate its position in the international information space" (формирование объективного восприятия России за рубежом, укрепление ее позиций в мировом информационном пространстве). At the same time, the document claims that Moscow itself "does not consider itself an enemy of the West" and "has no hostile intentions towards it", but only wants the West to "return to pragmatic interaction" with Russia.[148] Moscow's revisionist policy is presented as a defence against the West's alleged desire to subjugate Russia and dismember its territory. It elevates to the level of state doctrine the language and elements of the narrative (concepts, arguments) that appeared in official discourse and media propaganda after the adoption of the previous version in 2016 and since the start of full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

In the 2023 Concept, Ukraine figures explicitly as a front in Russia's civilisational and geopolitical narrative. Under the heading "Priority Areas of Foreign Policy", Russia declares as one of its tasks:

> *to interact with foreign states with which the Russian Federation has historically close relations and/or relations of strategic importance (states participating in integration*

[140] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §26b.
[141] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §99.
[142] Foreign Policy Concept 2016, §42.
[143] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation", 31.3.2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.
[144] Foreign Policy Concept 2023, §62.
[145] Foreign Policy Concept 2023, §13.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.

> *associations – primarily those in the post-Soviet space), and to ensure the prosperous, stable and secure development of such states.*[149]

Here Ukraine is implicitly included among those post-Soviet states of "strategic importance". Later, in a section on regional policy, the Concept warns against external interference in the "near abroad":

> *The most important for the security, stability, territorial integrity and social and economic development of Russia, strengthening its position as one of the influential sovereign centres of world development and civilization is to ensure sustainable long-term good-neighbourly relations and to combine the strengths in various fields with the CIS member states, which are connected with Russia by centuries-old traditions of joint statehood, deep interdependence in various fields, a common language and close cultures.*[150]

Unfriendly states and their allied forces are accused of destructive behaviour within the Russian Federation and neighbouring states undermining stability in the entire post-Soviet space:

[…] the Russian Federation intends to give priority to […] preventing and resolving armed conflicts, improving inter-state relations, and ensuring stability in the near abroad, including preventing the instigation of "colour revolutions" and other attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of Russia's allies and partners; […] preventing and countering unfriendly actions of foreign states and their alliances, which provoke disintegration processes in the near abroad[151]

Thus, Ukraine is not merely a pawn, but is portrayed as a space where competition for influence overlaps with confessional, linguistic, andcivilisational claims. By integrating Ukraine into its narrative of "strategic importance", Russia frames the Ukrainian question not as bilateral conflict alone, but as a contest over identity, tradition, integration, and alignment.

The Concept further reiterates the importance of post-Soviet integration, stating that the Russian Federation considers it necessary to continue strengthening close economic, social, cultural and humanitarian ties, and expanding the practice of integration at various levels in the post-Soviet space.

The phrasing "integration and interaction in various spheres" suggests flexibility: Russia signals both economic/institutional integration (customs, trade, regulatory alignment) and softer cultural ties (language, common institutions, diaspora). This continuity with earlier Concepts is sharpened by thecivilisational framing: integration is not just utilitarian, but part of Russia's claim to state-civilization leadership in Eurasia. Quite explicitely, the 2023 Concept claims a Russian exceptionalism:

> *More than a thousand years of independent statehood, the cultural heritage of the preceding era, deep historical ties with the traditional European culture and other Eurasian cultures, and the ability to ensure harmonious coexistence of different peoples, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups on one common territory, which has been developed over many centuries, determine Russia's special position as a unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that brings together the Russian people and other peoples belonging to the cultural and civilisational community of the Russian world.*[152]

[149] Foreign Policy Concept 2023, §60.
[150] Foreign Policy Concept 2023, §49.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Foreign Policy Concept 2023, §4.

> *Russia, taking into account its decisive contribution to the victory in World War II and its active role in shaping the contemporary system of international relations and eliminating the global system of colonialism, is one of the sovereign centres of global development performing a historically unique mission aimed at maintaining global balance of power and building a multipolar international system, as well as ensuring conditions for the peaceful progressive development of humanity on the basis of a unifying and constructive agenda.*[153]

Turning to the Global South, the 2023 Concept markedly expands the attention paid to those regions, reflected in both structure and rhetoric. Unlike earlier versions, it devotes an entire section to cooperation with African states development, trade, and diplomatic engagement – and anti-colonialism. In its dedicated section, the Concept asserts that:

> *Russia stands in solidarity with the African states in their desire for a more equitable polycentric world and elimination of social and economic inequality, which is growing due to the sophisticated neo-colonial policies of some developed states towards Africa. strengthening and deepening Russian-African cooperation in various spheres on a bilateral and multilateral basis […] giving priority to supporting the sovereignty and independence of interested African states, including through security assistance, inter alia food and energy security, as well as military and military-technical cooperation […] promoting and developing links in the humanitarian sphere, including scientific cooperation, training of national personnel, strengthening health systems, providing other assistance, promoting intercultural dialogue, protecting traditional spiritual and moral values, and the right to freedom of religion.*[154]

The language emphasizes equality, non-interference, and cooperation on shared global challenges. Although the Concept couches this outreach in benign rhetoric, the sheer frequency and scope of African references mark a tactical shift: Africa becomes more than peripheral – it becomes part of Russia's geostrategic chessboard.

Moreover, Russia frames its Africa engagement as opposed to Western dominance:

> *In cooperation with the countries of the Global South, the Russian Federation promotes the values of multipolarity, justice, sovereignty and sustainable development.*

This ties Russia's Africa policy to its larger anti-hegemony narrative: it presents itself as an alternative interlocutor to the West, championing sovereignty and resisting Western "conditionality" or tutelage.

3.2 Russian Key Narratives

Marlène Laruelle argues in her multi-method analysis of the Russian regime's ideological production process *Ideology and Meaning-Making under the Putin Regime* that the Putin regime does not rely on a single coherent ideology but rather on a small set of powerful metanarratives, i.e., broad, flexible stories about Russia's identity and mission, that are routinely mobilized across state media, presidential addresses, school curricula, and diplomatic rhetoric.[155] These metanarratives perform three functions simultaneously: they justify policy

[153] Foreign Policy Concept 2023, §5.
[154] Foreign Policy Concept 2023, §57.
[155] Marlène Laruelle, *Ideology and Meaning-Making under the Putin Regime* (Stanford University Press, 2025).

and coercion at home, provide moral and historical legitimation abroad, and supply emotional grammar that structures what political leaders and propagandists say and how audiences are expected to feel. Laruelle groups these contours into five strategic narratives: Russia as a civilisation-state, Russia as katechon, Russia as an anticolonial force, Russia as an antifascist power, and Russia as defender of traditional values. Read in light of the worldmaking perspective developed earlier in this paper, these metanarratives appear less as isolated justificatory or communicative devices than as building blocks of how the Russian leadership makes sense of political reality and seeks to stabilise it. They help define how Russia understands itself, how it situates its role in the international order, and where it draws the moral boundaries between "self" and "other". In this sense, the metanarratives identified by Laruelle function as worldmaking narratives that tie together domestic legitimation, foreign policy positioning, and international narrative contestation, providing a shared frame through which policy choices, historical references, and claims to authority become intelligible.

3.2.1 Russia as a civilisation-state

This metanarrative frames Russia not as one nation among many modern states but as a distinct civilisational entity with its own historical trajectory, spiritual foundations, and political logic. In public speech this produces recurring tropes: appeals to a unique "Russian way", invocations of continuity from Kyevan Rus' through the Orthodox tradition to the Soviet victory in the Second Wolrd War, and frequent contrasts with "Western" liberal individualism (presented as rootless, decadent, or predatory). Putin articulated this understanding explicitly, for instance, in his inaugural speech in May 2024, and earlier, in February 2023, in his address to the Federal Assembly:

> *The basis of Russia's statehood is inter-ethnic harmony, preservation of traditions of all peoples living in Russia – a country-civilization united by the Russian language."*[156]
>
> *"Russia is an open country and at the same time a unique civilisation. This thesis lays no claim to exclusivity and superiority. But this civilisation of ours is what matters most. We have inherited it from our ancestors and must preserve it for our descendants."*[157]

Politicians and commentators therefore speak in civilisational terms, e.g., Russia's policies are framed as protecting the continuity of a whole way of life rather than pursuing narrow national interests that turn geopolitical decisions into existential cultural choices. This grammar legitimates exceptional measures (sovereign democracy, information sovereignty, or military intervention) as necessary defences of a civilisational whole rather than ordinary politics.

3.2.2 Russia as a katechon

The katechon, originally a theological idea meaning "that which restrains the coming of chaos or the Antichrist" has become a surprisingly influential modern diplomatic and rhetorical resource for Kremlin discourse.[158] In practice, Russian leaders and allied intellectuals cast the country as the bulwark holding back a morally chaotic

[156] "Putin's Presidential Inauguration Speech: National Development Plans & Russia To Become World's Fourth Largest Economy by 2030", *Russia's Pivot to Aisa*, 9.5.2024, https://russiaspivottoasia.com/putins-presidential-inauguration-speech-national-development-plans-russia-to-become-worlds-fourth-largest-economy-by-2030/.
[157] "Russia Is Open Country, Unique Civilization, Says Putin", TASS, 21.2.2023, https://tass.com/politics/1579709.
[158] Laruelle, Ideology and Meaning-Making under the Putin Regime, ch. 9.

world order, whether that specific "chaos" is liberalism, global capitalism, or moral decay.[159] In public speeches this produces claims of sacrificial duty, durable suffering for the sake of cosmic stability, and language that frames Russia's actions as inevitable, protective, and even redemptive. In 2023, Patriarch Kirill framed Russia's role in explicitly eschatological terms, stating:

> *Russia is becoming that which restrains the total domination of evil, that is, the coming of the Antichrist. We must recognise that it is precisely at this time that an enormous spiritual responsibility has been placed upon our Church – for our people, for our country, and indeed for the entire world.*
>
> Россия становится удерживающей от тотального господства зла, то есть пришествия Антихриста. И мы должны сознавать, что именно в это время на Церковь нашу возложена огромная духовная ответственность и за народ свой, и за страну, да и за весь мир.[160]

Putin himself compared the politics of the West to the poisonous fruits from the biblical Sermon on the Mount after the Russian annexation of the Ukrainian Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson:

> *The dictatorship of Western elites is directed against all societies, including the peoples of the Western countries themselves. This is a challenge to everyone. Such a total denial of the human being, the overthrow of faith and traditional values, and the suppression of freedom take on the features of a "religion in reverse" – overt Satanism. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ, denouncing false prophets, says: by their fruits you shall know them. And these poisonous fruits are already evident to people – not only in our country, but in all countries, including for many people in the West itself.*
>
> *[Д]иктатура западных элит направлена против всех обществ, в том числе и народов самих западных стран. Это вызов всем. Такое полное отрицание человека, ниспровержение веры и традиционных ценностей, подавление свободы приобретает черты «религии наоборот» – откровенного сатанизма. В Нагорной проповеди Иисус Христос, обличая лжепророков, говорит: по плодам их узнаете их. И эти ядовитые плоды уже очевидны людям – не только в нашей стране, во всех странах, в том числе для многих людей и на самом Западе.*[161]

Dmitry Medvedev stated on his Telegram channel the "sacred goal" of the "special military operation" is "to stop the supreme ruler of hell, whatever name he may use – Satan, Lucifer, or Iblis":

[159] "The God of War and Demons. How Ideologists Invented Russia's Battle with the Antichrist" (Бог войны и демоны. Как идеологи придумали битву России с Антихристом), *Novaya Gazeta* (Новая газета), 10.6.2024, https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2024/06/10/bog-voiny-i-demony.

[160] "Patriarch Kirill Explained What Is Keeping the World from the Coming of the Antichris" (Патриарх Кирилл объяснил, что удерживает мир от пришествия антихриста), Gazeta.Ru (Газета.Ru), 10.7.2023, https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2023/07/10/20846618.shtml.

[161] "Speech by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin at the Ceremony Signing the Treaties on the Accession of the Donetsk People's Republic, Luhansk People's Republic, Zaporizhzhia Oblast and Kherson Oblast to Russia" (Выступление Президента Российской Федерации В.В.Путина на церемонии подписания договоров о принятии ДНР, ЛНР, Запорожской и Херсонской областей в состав России), 30.9.2022, https://israel.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/vystuplenie_prezidenta_rossiyskoy_federatsii_v_v_putina_na_tseremonii_podpisaniya_dogovorov_o_priyna/.

> *We have the power to send all enemies to hellfire, but that is not our task. We listen to the words of the Creator in our hearts and obey them. These words give us a sacred purpose. The purpose is to stop the supreme ruler of hell, whatever name he uses – Satan, Lucifer, or Iblis. For his purpose is destruction.*
>
> *У нас есть возможность отправить всех врагов в геенну огненную, но не это наша задача. Мы слушаем слова Создателя в наших сердцах и повинуемся им. Эти слова и дают нам священную цель. Цель остановить верховного властелина ада, какое бы имя он ни использовал – Сатана, Люцифер или Иблис. Ибо его цель – погибель.*[162]

The katechon narrative supplies moral high ground: violent or coercive acts – such as the invasion of Ukraine – are cast not simply as power politics but as grim necessities of historical providence. This elevates foreign policy debates to the level of metaphysics and makes dissent dangerous because it can be portrayed as collusion with the forces the katechon resists.

3.2.3 Russia as a leading anticolonial force

The Kremlin often borrows anticolonial language to reframe geopolitics: Russia presents itself as an ally of nations resisting Western domination and globalization, a position used to cultivate partners in the Global South and to justify interventions in its near abroad.[163] In everyday rhetorical practice, this becomes a staple of external messaging: Foreign Ministry briefings, speeches, op-eds, and diplomatic communiqués stress Russia's solidarity with formerly colonized peoples, denounce Western "neo-colonial" sanctions and interventions, and portray Russia's geopolitical moves as emancipatory rather than expansionist. Domestically, the anticolonial frame also helps rewrite Russia's imperial past into a narrative of anti-Western resistance rather than simple domination, softening uncomfortable historical legacies and enabling alliances with non-Western regimes.

3.2.4 Russia as an antifascist power

The memory of the Great Patriotic War is central to Russian political culture,[164] and Laruelle documents how the Kremlin weaponizes antifascist rhetoric as both shield and sword.[165] There are too many examples of the way Putin and the Russian political elite have weaponised Great Patriotic War[166] narratives for political aims, but public speech under this frame usually equates opponents with fascists or Nazi collaborators, while simultaneously claiming Russia's unique moral authority as heir to the Soviet victory over fascism. There more recent examples include Putin's Victory Day commemoration speech in May 2024

Today we see how they're trying to distort the truth about WWII. It interferes with those who are used to building their essentially colonial policy based on hypocrisy and lies. […] Revanchism, abuse of history, and an

[162] "Medvedev Stated That Russia's Objective Is to Stop the 'Supreme Ruler of Hell'" (Медведев назвал целью России остановить «верховного властелина ада»), *Kommersant (Коммерсантъ),* 4.11.2022, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5651334.

[163] See also Maxime Audinet, "'Down with Neocolonialism!' Strategic Narrative Resurgence and Foreign Policy Preferences in Wartime Russia", *European Journal of International Security*, 31.7.2025: 1-22, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10011.

[164] Elizaveta Gaufman, Security Threats and Public Perception: Digital Russia and the Ukraine Crisis, New Security Challenges (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[165] Laruelle, Ideology and Meaning-Making under the Putin Regime, esp. p. 91-94.

[166] The term used in Russia, and formerly in the Soviet Union, and some other post-Soviet states to describe the Eastern Front of World War II.

attempt to justify the current Nazi followers is part of an overall policy of the Western elites to stoke new regional conflicts.[167]

This accomplishes two rhetorical goals: it delegitimises domestic and foreign critics by associating them with universally condemned extremism, and it mobilises historical emotion (pride, grievance, and sacrificial memory) to justify present policies. The antifascist script is flexible: it can be marshalled to condemn actual far-right movements, but under state control it more often becomes a rhetorical blunt instrument that flattens political complexity into a moral binary: Russia (defender) versus fascism (other).

3.2.5 Russia as defender of traditional values

Laruelle emphasizes the role of conservative cultural tropes such as family, faith, social order in contemporary official discourse. Ever since the "sovereign morality turn" in 2012,[168] public speech routinely connects domestic politics to a cosmic struggle over the meaning of human life: leaders denounce "Western decadence", celebrate traditional gender roles, and present the state as protector of children, faith, and communal harmony. This narrative is a powerful mobilizer because it touches private life and identity – issues that are emotionally salient to broad audiences. Legislation, school curricula, and media campaigns echo the language of traditional values, turning cultural conservatism into an axis of political loyalty and moral clarity. Crucially, invoking "traditional values" allows the state to paint dissent as both politically and morally deviant. The more recent examples of this type of rhetoric include the Russian Security Council meeting in June 2025, where Putin said that

> *By depriving peoples of their value base, depriving them of sovereignty, it is easier to subjugate them, turn them into vassals. This is why it is important to resist attempts to impose on our citizens, especially young people, attitudes that destroy our values.*[169]

Putin's appeals are phrased in a language of utter urgency:

> *I just assumed that if we don't rely on our traditional values, we will simply be gone. Russia will lose its identity, and this is extremely dangerous from the point of view of the country's future.*[170]

he said in an interview with the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK) journalist Pavel Zarubin, explaining the ban on promoting non-traditional relationships among children – an issue that has made Russia and Putin particularly popular among the far-right around the world.[171] Putin claimed further

[167] "In Victory Day Speech, Putin Rails Against 'Distortion' of History", *The Moscow Times*, 9.5.2024, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/05/09/in-victory-day-speech-putin-rails-against-distortion-of-history-a85075.
[168] Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, "The Pussy Riot Affair and Putin's Démarche from Sovereign Democracy to Sovereign Morality", *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 4 (2014): 615–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.917075.
[169] "Unity, Traditional Values – What Putin Said at Security Council", TASS, 10.6.2025, https://tass.com/politics/1971475.
[170] "Russia to Cease to Exist, If It Stops Relying on Traditional Values – Putin", TASS, 15.6.2025, https://tass.com/politics/1973157.
[171] See Alina Polyakova, "Strange Bedfellows: Putin and Europe's Far Right", *World Affairs* 177, no. 3 (2014): 3-40; Sarah Riccardi-Swartz, "'Only Russia Can Save the World': Reactive Orthodoxies, Political Technology, and Religious Worldbuilding", *Temenos – Nordic Journal for the Study of Religion* 61, no. 1 (2025): 7–26, https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.160164; Maryna Shevtsova, "Between Nationalism and Solidarity: Writing on the Far Right, Anti-Gender Mobilisation and LGBTQ Activism in Ukraine's War Context", *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 20.9.2025: 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1332/25151088Y2025D000000106.

that all the peoples of Russia, living on the same territory for centuries, have a common moral principle, despite ethnic and religious differences:

These moral principles are based on our traditional values. Their loss is very dangerous from the point of view of preserving identity and, as a result, the statehood itself. That's why I started talking about it when I saw that there was some kind of movement going on inside the country, inside society, if you want to appear civilized, quasi-civilized, to introduce those little ideas of the Western mainstream into the consciousness of the peoples of the Russian Federation. Not because I decided to argue with someone. To prevent the collapse of the Russian statehood from within.[172]

The fragment above showcases the bundling of several metanarratives together, where Putin defines civilisation in anti-Western terms and state survival.

3.2.6 Russia as a victim of neo-Nazi aggression from a Western-backed Ukraine

This bundling of civilisational identity, purported anti-fascism, moral decline, and state survival provided a ready-made narrative repertoire that could be reconfigured once Russia moved to invade Ukraine in 2022. Sarah Oates argues that rather than simply generating persuasive messages, that Russia's strategic narratives operate as a form of symbolic infrastructure aimed at legitimising foreign-policy action.[173] In her analysis of Vladimir Putin's rhetoric surrounding the invasion, she identifies how the longstanding themes of Russian victimhood, civilisational mission and anti-Western decadence were reframed into a "distorted mirror" narrative: Russia portrays itself as the victim of neo-Nazi aggression from a Western-backed Ukraine and thus positions its military advance as a defensive "rescue" mission.[174] By embedding these claims in official documents, such as Putin's 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity Between Russians and Ukrainians"[175], and combining them with visual and institutional practices, the Kremlin converts historical grievances into actionable policy justification. Oates emphasises that strategic narratives are not simply propaganda in the classic sense, but rather map onto state behaviour and aim to structure possibilities for action: "nothing is true, but not everything is possible" reflects how the gap between narrative and reality can widen when ambitions exceed legibility. She finds that Russia's narrative about Ukraine represented a greater divergence from empirical reality than prior campaigns, demonstrating a structural break in how strategic narratives connect discourse, digital media, and war-making.

3.2.7 Ukraine as manifestations of an existential "war of values"

While Oates's analysis foregrounds how these bundled narratives function as symbolic infrastructure that translates discourse into action, Olena Snigyr offers a systematic mapping of how these narrative layers were organised as strategic narratives across distinct but interlocking levels of meaning during the first year of its

[172] "Russia to Cease to Exist, If It Stops Relying on Traditional Values – Putin".
[173] Sarah Oates, "Nothing Is True, But It Turns Out Not Everything Is Possible: Putin's Failed Attempt to Turn Strategic Narratives into Military Success in the Ukrainian Invasion", *SSRN Electronic Journal*, ahead of print, 2023, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4412501.
[174] Ibid., p. 8.
[175] "Vladimir Putin's Article 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'" (Статья Владимира Путина «Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев»), President of Russia (Президент России), 20.6.2021, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

full-scale invasion of Ukraine using Alister Miskimmon's tripartite framework of international-system, national, and issue narratives.[176] At the international-system level, Russia portrays the world as shifting from a unipolar, Western-dominated order to an "inevitable" multipolar one, while depicting the liberal West as clinging to hegemony through neocolonial economic and institutional mechanisms. The overarching message of "Russia is a victim of the West" anchors a moral justification for its aggression, framing Western sanctions, NATO expansion, and support for Ukraine as manifestations of an existential "war of values". Russia's national narrative presents the country as a sovereign and self-sustaining civilisation grounded in "traditional" rather than liberal values and as the natural leader of a non-liberal world, or "Greater Eurasia". The issue narrative extends this logic to claim that a new world order requires "conceptual, systemic, and structural change", legitimising Russia's call for alternative financial systems, regional spheres of influence, and the supremacy of state sovereignty over universal human rights. Within this framework, Snigyr shows how Russian elites deploy sub-narratives that deny Ukraine's sovereignty, elevate the defence of the "Russian World", and recast European dependence on the United States as proof of Western hypocrisy and subjugation. The Kremlin merges historical mythology, anti-colonial rhetoric, and cultural conservatism into a cohesive "grand narrative" positioning Russia both as a besieged victim and as a vanguard of global resistance to liberalism. By presenting its geopolitical confrontation as a moral crusade for justice and tradition, Russia seeks to erode faith in liberal institutions and attract support from the Global South. Snigyr concludes that this discursive project aims to replace international law with a balance-of-power model that normalises illiberal sovereignty and undermines the liberal international order.

Read through the lens of worldmaking developed earlier in this paper, these framings function not merely as rhetorical resources, but as mechanisms that actively organise political reality. As Laruelle highlights, these narratives do not simply exist as background ideas; they constitute the templates for much public rhetoric. Speeches, press conferences, educational materials, and media outputs rarely offer careful theoretical argument. Instead, they assemble familiar narrative elements – civilisational uniqueness, sacrificial *katechon* duty, anticolonial solidarity, antifascist righteousness, and traditional values – into easily digestible moral claims. This repetition performs two functions: it renders complex policy decisions linguistically coherent, allowing audiences to interpret action within a pre-framed storyline, and it narrows the space of plausible meanings, as alternative framings come to appear incoherent, illegitimate, or even treasonous. The Putin regime's ideological production is therefore both pragmatic and networked: intellectuals, think tanks, media managers, and state institutions adapt these metanarratives to specific audiences and contexts, generating a continuous flow of resonant public speech.

4. Case Study: Alignments, Borrowing and Divergences between Chinese and Russian Narratives in the Case of Ukraine War

4.1 Dynamics of Narrative Alignment

The Russian invasion of Ukraine provides the best exemplary case to understand the dynamics and mechanisms of narrative alignment between China and Russia. Immediately before and after the outbreak of

[176] Olena Snigyr, "Russian Strategic Narratives, 2022–2023", *Orbis* 68, no. 1 (2024): 3–23, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2023.11.002; Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*.

war, Chinese reporting was heavily shaped by pro-Russian narratives and Russian disinformation. Their adoption was facilitated by media cooperation agreements concluded at the China-Russia Media Forum that took place on 25 June 2015 in St. Petersburg, the year after Russian annexing of Krim – attended on the Chinese side by the Politburo member and Minister of Central Propaganda Liu Qibao (signifying the significance of the event). For China, the China-Russia media cooperation is a part of the "comprehensive strategic partnership" between the two countries. The 2015 Forum's theme was "How to do a good job in international communication in the era of all media" (全媒体时代下如何做好国际传播), and according to official Chinese reporting, the media cooperation agreements were intended to "consolidate the public opinion basis of the two countries" and "reduce misinterpretations by Western media".[177] Since then, the such for a were held yearly. Media from both countries have signed numerous cooperation agreements over the past years: People's Daily, Xinhua, Global Times and China Media Corporation have joined hands variously with RT, Russia Channel One, TASS and Sputnik on the Russian side.[178]

These agreements allowed Russian state media to produce news content in Chinese for a Chinese audience and distribute it via their own social media accounts, such as on Weibo.[179] The account of Sputnik, the state news agency known as a propaganda tool, for example, had 11.6 million followers on Weibo at the time of Russia's attack on Ukraine and published more than 100 posts per day in the days that followed – its timeline dominated by terms such as "criminal Zelensky", "empire of lies", "fake news", and "Nazi."[180]

At the Chinese Foreign Ministry's press conference on 24 February 2022, the day of the Russian attack, the ministry adopted Russian wording, referring to a "special military operation" (特别军事) in eastern Ukraine.[181] At the same time, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying rejected the term "invasion" in exchanges with Western journalists and accused the West of double standards: U.S. military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, carried out without UN mandates and at massive civilian cost, she argued, had not been labelled "invasions." This line of argument was quickly taken up by Chinese state media and official channels. The

[177] De Yongjian 德永健, "China and Russia Host Media Forum to Strengthen Public Support Between the Two Nations" (中俄举办媒体论坛 夯实两国民意基础), *People's Daily Online* (人民网), 24.06.2015, http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0624/c1001-27198539.html.

[178] Katja Drinhausen and Mayya Solonina, "Chinese and Russian media partner to 'tell each other's stories well'", MERICS, 22.12.2020, https://merics.org/de/kommentar/chinese-and-russian-media-partner-tell-each-others-stories-well.

[179] Sina Weibo (*xinlang weibo*) is one of the largest Chinese microblogging services, with over 590 million monthly active users. https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/weibo-announces-first-quarter-2025-unaudited-financial-results-302461555.html.

[180] Li Yuan, "How China Embraces Russian Propaganda and Its Version of the War", *The New York Times*, March 4, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/business/china-russia-ukraine-disinformation.html (accessed September 22, 2024). A significant impact for narrative alignment, as was corraborated to one of the authors of this paper by a Chinese Russia specialist working in a government-affiliated Chinese think tank, is played by the frequent visits of Russian diplomats engaging with Chinese officials. To paraphrase, "Almost every week, there is somebody from the Russian embassy or from Russia meeting with the Chinese Foreign Ministry and telling them their side of the story, conveying in particular a victim narrative, how Russia was victimised by the West. They only hear the Russian side of the story. Why are there no Western diplomats doing the same?"

[181] PRC Minstry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022" (2022年2月24日外交部发言人华春莹主持例行记者会), 24.2.2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/202202/t20220224_10645295.shtml.

English-language Twitter account of the international broadcaster CGTN, for instance, quoted Hua Chunying as saying:

> *Some media keep using the word "invasion" on the #Russia-#Ukraine situation, but what word did they use when the U.S. military decided to unilaterally initiate military actions against #Afghanistan and #Iraq without any legal basis or authorization from the UN?*[182]

It appears that despite initial use by the Foreign Ministry, there was no clear directive to the Chinese press to strictly adopt the term "special military operation" – and the phrase did not gain lasting traction in Chinese discourse. It was used almost exclusively by central-level media and newswire, which themselves varied in their terminology – alternatively referring to "Russia-Ukraine conflict" (俄乌冲突) but also "Russia-Ukraine war" (俄乌战争), but also to a lesser extent "Russia-Ukraine military conflict" (俄乌军事冲突), "Russian military operation" (俄罗斯军事行动) or "this war" (这场战争).[183] In the Foreign Ministry's press conferences, the terms most commonly used were "problem" (问题), "crisis" (危机), and "situation" (局势).[184] It was not until March 10 that China explicitly referred to the war as such for the first time: During a meeting with his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that China supported "a ceasefire and an end to the war".[185]

Chinese state media received internal instructions not to publish any pro-Ukrainian or pro-Western positions. On 22 February 2022 – two days before the invasion – what appeared to be an internal corporate instruction on Ukraine coverage was posted on the official *Weibo* account on *Horizon News* (世面), a subsidiary of the CCP owned daily newspaper *Beijing News* (新京报) focused on international affairs: no content was to be published that cast Russia in a negative light or appeared pro-Western. All drafts required prior approval before release, comments were to be carefully moderated, and only hashtags authorized by People's Daily, Xinhua, or CCTV were to be used.[186] The original post was quickly deleted, but screenshots continued to circulate in the comment sections of other *Horizon News*.

On Chinese social media platforms, voices critical of Putin or calling for "peace" – particularly those that challenged pro-Russian or pro-Putin content – were swiftly censored. Among them was the *Weibo* account of Jin Xing (金星), a popular artist, talk show host, and China's first openly transgender celebrity, who had 13.6 million followers. The account was suspended after she referred to Putin as a "crazy Russian man" and urged her followers to pray for peace.[187] The account of well-known actress Ke Lan was also suspended after she

[182] CGTN [@CGTNOfficial] Post on *X/Twitter*, 24.2.2022, https://x.com/CGTNOfficial/status/1496754290139938817.

[183] David Bandursky, "When War Isn't War." *China Media Project*, 12.3.2022. https://chinamediaproject.org/2022/03/12/when-war-isnt-war/.

[184] "Debates beyond the official government line" (Debatten jenseits der offiziellen Regierungslinie), *China Spektrum Report*, no. 1, August 2022, https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/220894ChinaSpektrumReport01.pdf.

[185] Bandursky, "When War Isn't War."

[186] Samuel Wade, "Minitrue: Keep Weibo Posts on Ukraine Favorable to Russia; Control Comments." *China Digital Times (CDT)*, 23.2.2022. https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/02/minitrue-keep-weibo-posts-on-ukraine-favorable-to-russia-control-comments/.

[187] Eduardo Baptista, "China Censors Online Ukraine Debate, Bars Calls for Peace", Media & Telecom, *Reuters*, 10.3.2022, https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/china-censors-online-ukraine-debate-bars-calls-peace-2022-03-10/.

liked and shared images and comments opposing the war, including photos of anti-war protests in St. Petersburg. Posts by prominent Chinese historians who attempted to organize petitions against the war were removed from the messaging platform WeChat.[188] When Andrew Parsons, president of the International Paralympic Committee, called for peace during the opening ceremony of the Paralympic Winter Games – which began in Beijing just ten days after the Russian invasion – Chinese state broadcaster CCTV deliberately omitted that portion of his speech from its Chinese translation.[189]

After about a week, however, the very firm pro-Russian narrative stance of the Chinese government began to show shifts. The Chinese media was instructed to appear neutral – neither pro-Russia nor pro-Ukraine – and to highlight the need to "address each other's concerns through peaceful means".[190] Still, media coverage was not allowed to include words such as "invasion" or "attack". Instructions to internet companies were similarly ambivalent.

On 3 March, internet companies were issued instructions by the China Cyberspace Administration to "turn down the temperature on public sentiment toward the Russia-Ukraine conflict [and] strictly control extreme malicious speech supporting Russia over Ukraine, Ukraine over Russia, etc., and dissemination of any harmful content such as public anti-war declarations".[191] Subsequently, Chinese social media platforms including *Douyin*, *Weibo*, *WeChat*, and *Bilibili* have moved to censor vulgar commentary, and pro-war sentiment, and accounts deemed to be inciting hostility or spreading sexist and inappropriate remarks, particularly targeting Ukrainian women.[192] The platforms have emphasized the importance of maintaining rational discourse and warned users against content that could endanger Chinese nationals abroad or escalate international tensions. The prevailing tone, however, continued to lean heavily pro-Russian, with widespread acceptance of Russia's narrative portraying the invasion as a "de-Nazification" campaign and frequent, uncritical amplification of Russian claims by Chinese state media.[193] The terms "invasion" or "attack" remained prohibited, and despite claims of neutrality, the coverage continued to be distinctly pro-Russian. Images of anti-war protests or online petitions opposing the war were not permitted.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Jonathan Cheng and Joshua Robinson, "China Censors Paralympics Opening Ceremony, Premier League Over Ukraine", Life, *Wall Street Journal*, 4.3.2022, https://www.wsj.com/sports/olympics/china-paralympics-opening-ceremony-premier-league-ukraine-11646410117.

[190] Tracy Wen Liu, "China's Propaganda Over Ukraine Is Shifting and Uncertain", *Foreign Policy*, 3.1.2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/01/china-propaganda-ukraine-russia/.

[191] Samuel Wade, "Minitrue: Turn Down Temperature, Strictly Control Content on Ukraine Situation", *China Digital Times (CDT)*, 5.3.2022, https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/03/minitrue-turn-down-temperature-strictly-control-content-on-ukraine-situation/.

[192] Shen Lu, "How China's Social Media Handles Fake News about Ukraine", *Protocol*, 7.3.2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20220307014227/https://www.protocol.com/china/china-ukraine-war-misinformation.

[193] Li Yuan, "How China Embraces Russian Propaganda and Its Version of the War", *The New York Times*, 4.3.2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/business/china-russia-ukraine-disinformation.html.

4.2 Adoption and Adaptation of Russian Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories

Specifically, China adopted the following Russian disinformation and conspiracy theories:

4.2.1 "Denazification of Ukraine"

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the narrative of "Ukrainian Nazis" was virtually absent from Chinese state media. This changed abruptly following the outbreak of war on 24 February 2022. From that point onward, both state-controlled outlets and social media platforms in China were saturated with content echoing this theme. On the day of the invasion, the Chinese-language service of *Sputnik* claimed that NATO was supporting Nazis within the Ukrainian government. The following day, CGTN quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who accused Ukraine's leadership of being infiltrated by Nazis. A key visual asset in the spread of this narrative was a 2019 Facebook photo showing a Ukrainian veteran participating in Hong Kong's anti-extradition protests. Originally circulated by Russian outlets such as *News Front* and *Rusvesna*, the image was later picked up by *Sputnik*, which posed the provocative question: "Why are Ukrainian Nazis participating in protests in Hong Kong?" Chinese state media – particularly *Global Times*, *Guancha*, and *China Daily* – took this narrative further. They alleged that the United States had financed Ukraine's neo-Nazi Azov Battalion to take part in the Hong Kong protests, effectively linking the Russian "neo-Nazi" storyline to a long-standing Chinese trope: foreign interference in domestic affairs. This fusion of narratives allowed Chinese media to reinforce their own ideological agenda while amplifying Russian propaganda. By 26 February, as Russia came under increasing Western sanctions, state-affiliated Weibo accounts escalated the messaging. Posts emphasized a shared victimhood between China and Russia, allegedly targeted by "foreign forces" and a Western-backed form of Nazism. On 27 February, *Guancha* recycled the 2019 protest photo, and on 3 March, the Communist Youth League posted similar content, directly linking the Azov Battalion to the Hong Kong protests.[194] Although the Chinese Foreign Ministry did not officially endorse the "neo-Nazi" narrative, its wide presence in state media firmly anchored it in public discourse.

Chinese state media also extended this messaging to international audiences via their foreign-language social media channels, particularly on Twitter. These accounts frequently repeated unverified claims made by Russian officials – including President Vladimir Putin – without contextualization or critical framing. Among the most prominent was Putin's assertion that "Ukrainian neo-Nazis opened fire on Chinese students", a claim that the Chinese Foreign Ministry declined to confirm in a subsequent press conference. Other Chinese state media outlets, such as the monthly political journal *Frontline* (前线), echoed statements from the Russian Ministry of Defence alleging that Ukraine's "Nazi military tortures the Russian military". Chinese media also amplified disinformation accusing Ukraine of using civilians as human shields. On February 28, CCTV's evening news cited Russian claims to this effect. A few days later, *Guancha* ran the headline that the Russian military

[194] Jerry Yu, "Analysis: How Ukraine Has Been Nazified in the Chinese Information Space?", *Doublethink Lab*, 31.3.2022, https://medium.com/doublethinklab/analysis-how-ukraine-has-been-nazified-in-chinese-information-space-81ce236f6a55.

was only targeting military sites, while the Ukrainian side was deliberately endangering civilians by using them as shields.[195]

4.2.2 "US-Biolabs in Ukraine"

On 8 March 2022, the 13th day of the war, one of the most discussed topics on Chinese social media was not the humanitarian crisis or the more than two million people who had fled Ukraine, but the alleged existence of 26 US military biological laboratories in Ukraine. Under the hashtag *"The 26 American Biolabs in Ukraine Are Just Tip of Iceberg"* (#美国在乌克兰的26个生物实验室是冰山一角#), the narrative spread rapidly – within hours, the hashtag had received over 180 million views.[196] In the comments sections, many users demanded explanations and strongly criticised the United States. At a press conference, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian expressed concern over the supposed biolabs and publicly speculated about their purpose.[197] His remarks echoed a central narrative in Russian disinformation – the tactic of *distraction*, a classic method in psychological warfare aimed at deflecting attention and legitimising the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Chinese state media also played a key role in amplifying the message. *The Global Times* published two prominent reports, on 10 and 17 March respectively, the first referencing *Sputnik News*, the second quoting Russian President Vladimir Putin.[198] One headline asked: *"What Are the US Hiding in the Biolabs Discovered in Ukraine?"*[199] This narrative not only served to deflect attention from Russia's actions in Ukraine but also allowed China to redirect prior Western criticism back at the United States – particularly over the origins of COVID-19. It reinforced a counter-narrative already circulating in Chinese media: that the virus may have emerged from a US laboratory, rather than from Wuhan.

4.2.3 Framing the US and NATO as Aggressors

A central element of discourse on Chinese social media was the widespread use of "whataboutism". Prominent accounts circulated memes that relativized criticism of the Russian attack. The popular science blogger Occam's Razor (@奥卡姆剃刀) with over 12 million followers on *Weibo* posted a meme showing a person with "no expression" when the U.S. drops bombs on Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Libya, and shouting "I'm Anti-War!!" in the last picture when Russia attacks Ukraine, commenting: "Some people are bitterly bashing Russia while self-righteously preaching against the war. Of course, it is correct to be anti-war, and everyone should defend world peace. But you should ask them: were you also anti-war when the United States

[195] Zack Cooper et al., "China's State Media and Government Officials Are Backing Russia on Ukraine", Hamilton Weekly Reports, *Alliance For Securing Democracy*, 13.3.2022, https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/chinas-state-media-and-government-officials-are-backing-russia-on-ukraine-war/.

[196] Manya Koetse, "The Russia-Ukraine War in the Chinese Media", Leiden Asia Centre, 9.3.2022, https://leidenasiacentre.nl/lac-shorts-shifting-focus-the-russia-ukraine-war-in-the-chinese-media/.

[197] CMG News Radio (总台环球资讯) [CMG News Radio], "The 26 American Biolabs in Ukraine Are Just Tip of Iceberg" (美国在乌克兰26个生物实验室是冰山一角), *Weibo*, 8.3.2022, https://weibo.com/tv/show/1034:4744784104063121?from=old_pc_videoshow.

[198] Mara Hvistendahl and Alexey Kovalev, "Hacked Russian Files Reveal Propaganda Agreement With China", The Intercept, 30.12.2022, https://theintercept.com/2022/12/30/russia-china-news-media-agreement/.

[199] Deng Zijun, "What Is the US Hiding in the Biolabs Discovered in Ukraine?", *Global Times*, 17.3.2022, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1255164.shtml.

invaded Iran, Iraq, Panama, Libya, Yugoslavia, or Afghanistan?"[200] Such posts reflect a clear alignment between Chinese and Russian anti-Americanism. Russian propaganda found a receptive echo chamber in the Chinese online public sphere, where many users readily adopted and spread Russian narratives – often entirely without official guidance.

A particularly widespread motif in Chinese social media was the narrative of Russia's "legitimate security interests". A widely shared Weibo cartoon by the artist Pusang Gala, titled *"Narrative versus Reality"*, illustrated this perspective in a striking way. Under the headline *"Western Public Opinion"* (西方舆论) a television screen shows a menacing Russian bear and a small, frightened man representing Ukraine – an image caricaturing the common Western portrayal of the war. The larger scene that the television conceals, however, tells a different story: behind "Ukraine", depicted as a small man with a knife, lurk three other figures labelled "USA", "NATO", and "UK", inciting Ukraine to attack the mother bear "Russia", who is apparently defending her cubs in their den.[201] In comments, the war was often compared to the Korean War (1950–1953), during which China supported North Korea and, from its own perspective, defended itself against the United States. The implicit message: Russia is acting in self-defence – a framing that echoes the Russian security narrative while also drawing on anti-Western interpretations that resonated strongly in the Chinese online sphere. In this vein, state media and social media discourse repeatedly stressed three themes: the persistence of a Cold War mentality in the West, NATO's expansion as evidence of American hegemonism, and the neglect of Russia's security concerns. These arguments framed Russia's actions as self-defence and fed into a broader, long-standing Chinese critique of what is seen as a one-sided Western security order.

4.2.4 Divergencies: Re-centering the NATO Narrative on China US and NATO as Aggressors

The anti-NATO narrative in Chinese reporting on the war in Ukraine was, however, not merely a reproduction of Russian lines of argument but linked to China's own historical experience of confrontation with the West – particularly the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo war in 1999, in which three Chinese journalists were killed. Although then U.S. President Bill Clinton publicly apologised and NATO described the attack as a mistake, the incident remains deeply embedded in China's collective memory and was reactivated in reporting in 2022.

On 24 February – the day of the Russian invasion – a reporter from the state broadcaster CCTV asked at a Foreign Ministry press conference about U.S. claims that China was obliged to influence Russia to halt the escalation. Spokesperson Hua Chunying responded with sharp criticism, invoking the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. She declared: "The United States has no right to tell China what to do" (美方没资格来告诉中方怎么做) and "NATO still owes a blood debt to China" (北约至今还欠中国一笔血债).[202] Both remarks were amplified by the *People's Daily* on Sina Weibo as hashtags[203], generating over 1.2 billion

[200] Koetse, "The Russia-Ukraine War in the Chinese Media".

[201] Ibid.

[202] "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022", PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24.2.2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347231.html.

[203] #美方没资格来告诉中方怎么做#)The United States has no right to tell China what to do" and #北约至今还欠中国一笔血债# (NATO still owes a blood debt to China)

and 650 million views. The press conference – and especially the video of Hua's appearance, which gained more than two million likes – set the tone for subsequent state-media coverage: China was framed as responsible, the U.S. as irresponsible.[204]

This rhetoric tapped into a broader narrative deeply rooted in China's politics of memory: national humiliation at the hands of the West, stretching back to the Opium Wars. Rejecting Western-led "bloc politics" and stressing the "real threat" posed by the U.S. and its allies also helped justify a neutral, though in practice Russia-leaning, stance. Following Hua's remarks, videos of the 1999 attack resurfaced in *Weibo*. The popular portal *Guancha.cn* released footage of the aftermath with the caption: "We must never forget this day", prompting bloggers to call again for a NATO apology and to criticise U.S. "influence attempts".[205]

4.3 Discursive Shift in Autumn 2022

In autumn 2022, as it became clear that Russia would not secure a quick victory and was coming under mounting military pressure, sentiment on Chinese social media began to shift. Support for Moscow gave way to more critical voices, particularly regarding its military weakness. Popular military bloggers such as "Littlepigpig" (@用户littlepigpig1) captured this mood: in one meme he dismissed Putin's nuclear threats as a sign of desperation, asking rhetorically, "What would be the point of sending hundreds of thousands of Russians into Ukraine to be brutally slaughtered before launching a nuclear strike?"[206] Such posts, however, signaled not a turn towards Ukraine, but growing disillusionment with Russia's war effort.

On June 24, 2023, the armed uprising of the Russian mercenary group Wagner, led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, became one of the dominant topics on Chinese social media. The group advanced to within about 200 kilometers of Moscow but unexpectedly halted after negotiations with Belarusian President Lukashenko. Online reactions in China were diverse, reflecting a mix of fascination, concern, and geopolitical reorientation. On Weibo in particular, the hashtag "Putin accuses Wagner chief of treason" (#普京指责瓦格纳负责人叛国#) quickly became a trending topic, receiving more than 1.2 billion views within 24 hours, while reports of troop movements near Moscow ranked among the most discussed posts.[207] Many netizens viewed the coup as a historic moment, drawing parallels with Chinese rebellions of the past – some of which had brought down entire dynasties.

A central voice in the debate was Hu Xijin, former editor-in-chief of the Global Times. Drawing on his background in Russian language and literature, he commented on both Weibo and Twitter. On June 24, he noted it was unclear whether the events amounted to "internal strife" (内讧) or an "armed rebellion" (叛乱), warning that Russia's defensive lines could collapse if Wagner fully backed Prigozhin. He later called the mutiny a "very unusual event", observing that armed uprisings were rare in Russian history – unlike in China, where

[204] Koetse, "The Russia-Ukraine War in the Chinese Media".

[205] Ibid.

[206] Manya Koetse, "Why Russia Is Nicknamed the 'Weak Goose' on Chinese Social Media", *What's on Weibo*, 2.10.2022, https://www.whatsonweibo.com/why-russia-is-nicknamed-the-weak-goose-on-chinese-social-media/.

[207] Manya Koetse, "Russian Perspectives, Ridiculing Putin Supporters: Chinese Online Media Responses to the Wagner Mutiny", *What's on Weibo*, 24.6.2023, https://www.whatsonweibo.com/russian-perspectives-ridiculing-putin-supporters-chinese-online-media-responses-to-the-wagner-mutiny/.

regional military leaders had often challenged central authority. On Twitter, he even suggested Russia would never be the same after this incident – though he later deleted the remark.[208]

Strikingly, Chinese state media offered no clear line. Official statements stayed vague, while individual think tank commentators such as Yu Sui (China Center for Contemporary World Studies) and Xu Wenhong (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) openly pointed to Russia's structural tensions, describing the Wagner–Defense Ministry clash as "only the tip of the iceberg" of deeper societal contradictions.[209]

It appears that China was not informed about the dynamics of the Wagner uprising in advance – a fact that came through between the lines in state media coverage. The event's sudden dynamics and intense scrutiny highlighted how closely Chinese perceptions of Russia had become tied to questions of internal stability and foreign policy calculation. When Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko visited Beijing on June 25, 2023, the contrast in official statements was telling. Moscow referred openly to the mutiny, while Beijing avoided any mention, instead stressing the "ever-deepening mutual trust" and the *need* (要, *yao*) to safeguard stability.[210] In CCP discourse, *yao* usually signals a shortcoming rather than a fact, implying that stability in the relationship must be re-established. This divergence suggested the coup was seen in Beijing as a strain on bilateral ties. Later communications reinforced this impression. At the Foreign Ministry briefing, the mutiny was addressed only in response to a question, with a generic assurance of support for Russia's "stability and prosperity."[211] By contrast, Moscow claimed that China had explicitly backed its stabilization efforts.[212] The difference – direct reassurance versus studied vagueness – sent a clear signal: Beijing was displeased. With Xinjiang and a long-shared border making Russian stability crucial, China's implicit message was firm: keep your house in order.

4.4 Narrative Selection and Adaptation for China's Goals

Notably, while after Russia's invasion in Ukraine, China reproduced numerous Russian disinformation narratives but used them selectively to convey its own political messages. For instance, the Russian narrative of the "neo-Nazi Azov Battalion" was linked to Chinese discourse on the Hong Kong protests: Ukrainian veterans who had participated in the 2019 demonstrations against the extradition law in Hong Kong were presented as evidence of a Western-orchestrated alliance of extremist forces.

Similarly, Russian disinformation about alleged U.S. biolabs in Ukraine was employed to revive an older Chinese narrative – the theory that COVID-19 may have originated in a U.S. laboratory rather than in Wuhan. The narrative of NATO as the real aggressor was also strategically expanded: alongside Ukraine, increasing

[208] Ibid.
[209] "Wagner Incident Resolved, but It's an Uneasy Calm", *China Daily*, 26.6.2023, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202306/26/WS6498e508a310bf8a75d6b900.html.
[210] Ministerstvo inostranykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, "O vstrechakh zamestitelya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii A.Yu. Rudenko s rukovodstvom Ministerstva inostranykh del Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki", 25.6.2023, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1892829/ (accessed September 9, 2025); PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Deputy Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu Held Consultations with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Rudenko", 25.6.2023. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3220_664352/3222_664356/202307/t20230714_11113229.html.
[211] *PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Remarks on the Wagner Group Incident", 25.6.2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/202405/t20240530_11349777.html.
[212] "China Supports Russian Leadership in Connection with June 24 Events", *TASS Russian News Agency*, 25.6.2023, https://tass.com/russias-foreign-policy/1638109.

attention shifted to the South China Sea, not least because NATO in 2022 had officially named China as a security challenge.

After the first weeks of the war – particularly following revelations of the atrocities in Bucha – China adjusted its communication strategy. While formally maintaining neutrality, in practice this amounted to a "pro-Russian neutrality". Within this framework, certain forms of criticism were permitted, though usually coded, indirect, and confined to Party-affiliated channels.

Russian perspectives nevertheless remained dominant, due in large part to systematic content-sharing between Russian and Chinese state media as well as the active presence of Russian actors on Chinese social networks.

5. Case Study: Manufacturing Consensus for the "Community of Shared Future"

The concept of a "Community of shared future for Mankind" offers a particularly revealing case for analysing how China seeks to manufacture international consensus through semantic battles and narrative contestation. Over the past decade, the notion has evolved from a vague diplomatic slogan into a central organising principle of Chinese foreign policy and global governance discourse. Its elevation to the guiding motif of Chinese diplomacy at the CCP Central Committee's 2023 Work Conference on Foreign Affairs underscores that it is not merely rhetorical, but functions as a strategic framework through which Beijing articulates its vision of international order, legitimacy, and global responsibility.

This makes the "Community of shared future" an analytically rich case for three reasons. First, it exemplifies how China advances new concepts with broad moral appeal and deliberately low initial specificity, allowing them to attract wide endorsement while remaining flexible enough to be filled with content over time. Second, it operates at the intersection of semantic battles and narrative contestation: familiar terms such as "community", "shared", "future", and "mankind" are redefined to challenge liberal interpretations of universalism, sovereignty, and human rights, while embedding regime security and state-centric governance as implicit norms. Third, the concept provides a vehicle for institutionalisation, as it is progressively anchored in UN language, multilateral statements, and associated initiatives such as the Global Development, Security, and Civilisation Initiatives.

As a result, this case study allows the analysis to move beyond discrete FIMI incidents and to examine how influence is exercised cumulatively, through the normalisation of alternative interpretive frames rather than through overt disinformation. It illustrates how consensus can be manufactured not by falsifying facts, but by reshaping the semantic environment in which global governance debates unfold – making it an especially suitable lens for understanding China's long-term, discursive approach to foreign information manipulation and interference.

The slogan "Community of shared future" (still without the addition of 'for mankind') first appeared in the party congress report of the then outgoing party chairman Hu Jintao at the 18th CCP National Congress in October 2012 – with at least the relevant passage in the report said to have been written by Xi Jinping. Xi himself first mentioned the slogan on 5 December 2012 at a meeting with foreign experts working in China and then on 23 March 2013 in Moscow in a speech at the Moscow Institute of International Relations, his first

foreign trip as China's president.[213] The term subsequently appeared in speeches at home and abroad, sometimes with philosophical references to the yin-yang concept – "we are increasingly becoming a community with a shared future, in which I am increasingly part of you and you are part of me" – and sometimes with historical connotations – "China and Africa have always been a community with a shared future".[214] The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), China-ASEAN cooperation and, finally, the whole of Asia (in Xi's speech at the Boao Forum for Asia in 2015) were also described as "communities of shared future", while China and Europe "shared a common destiny" (and common interests).

The slogan celebrated its global premiere on 28 September 2015 in a speech by Xi to the UN General Assembly, in which he presented it as a "Chinese solution"[215] to global challenges and called for the establishment of a "new type of international relations with win-win cooperation and the creation of a community with a shared future for mankind". It was the meeting following the Sustainable Development Summit, at which the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals were adopted – the "Community of shared future" was to be placed in this context. Incidentally: until 2015, Beijing translated the word "fate" (*mingyun* 命运) literally as "destiny" in English-language external communications. After that, the translation "future" was used because Chinese diplomats were concerned that "destiny" would sound too esoteric or deterministic in an international context.[216]

Following the United States' retreat from multilateral institutions under the Trump administration, Chinese leaders identified what they perceived as a discursive and institutional vacuum in global governance. Beijing responded by repositioning itself rhetorically as a defender of multilateralism, while simultaneously redefining what multilateralism, international order, and global responsibility should mean. Central to this effort was the elevation of the "Community of shared future for Mankind" from a slogan into the overarching narrative frame of Chinese foreign policy, formally enshrined in the CCP Constitution in 2017 and in the PRC Constitution in 2018.

In parallel, China sought to anchor the narratives of the Community of shared future and the BRI systematically in UN documents. A 2016 UN Security Council resolution on the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) referenced the BRI, while subsequent resolutions in 2017 also mentioned the "Community of shared future for Mankind." Even the UN General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council adopted the wording – developments that Chinese state media portrayed as evidence of a new international or global consensus around Xi Jinping's ideas.

As criticism of the Belt and Road Initiative mounted from 2018 onwards – particularly around debt, environmental harm, and transparency – this discursive strategy adapted. While the BRI lost normative momentum, the "Community of shared future" was decoupled from infrastructure finance and repositioned as a broader civilisational and governance narrative. This shift illustrates a recurring pattern in Chinese narrative contestation: when a concrete policy attracts resistance, its underlying concepts are preserved by reembedding them in more abstract, morally appealing language.

[213] "Xi Jinping on the Community of shared future for Mankind" (习近平论人类命运共同体（2012年11月8日至2013年12月31日)), China International Development Cooperation Agency, 13.7.2021, http://www.cidca.gov.cn/2021-07/13/c_1211238463.htm.
[214] Ibid.
[215] The term "Chinese solutions" for the world was first mentioned by Xi in a speech at the Körber Foundation in Berlin in spring 2014. See: Shaun Breslin, *China Risen? Studying Chinese Global Power*, Bristol Studies in East Asia International Relations (Bristol University Press, 2021).
[216] Qian Gang, "The Birth of a Foreign Policy Catchphrase", *Echowall*, 18.6.2019, https://www.echo-wall.eu/china-and-world/off/birth-foreign-policy-catchphrase.

The intensification of U.S. – China rivalry under the Biden administration further sharpened this semantic struggle. Western initiatives such as Build Back Better World (B3W), Global Gateway, and the Summit for Democracy were framed by Beijing as ideological containment. In response, Chinese officials increasingly deployed the language of "true multilateralism" and linked it explicitly to the Community of shared future, casting Western alliances as exclusionary "bloc politics" and positioning China as the champion of inclusivity, equality, and global justice.[217]

What appears as consensual and benign rhetoric thus performs important discursive work. As Chinese Party-state documents openly acknowledge, the Community of shared future encapsulates the CCP's worldview and value system and offers it as a template for global civilisation. The Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) function as operational platforms for a broader narrative project. Rather than openly rejecting existing international frameworks, they seek to redefine the meaning and hierarchy of core concepts such as development, security, human rights, and governance. In this sense, they are instruments in an ongoing semantic battle over how international order is interpreted and legitimised.

The GDI reframes development by prioritising infrastructure, economic growth, and state capacity as preconditions, while marginalising governance reform and rights-based approaches. Development is thus presented as a technical and material process insulated from external normative scrutiny. The GCI extends this logic to values and rights, relativising their universality and subordinating them to sovereignty, stability, and culturally specific paths to modernisation. The GSI applies a similar move in the security domain, invoking "common" and "indivisible" security while redefining "legitimate security interests" in ways that privilege regime security and question alliance-based security arrangements.

Taken together, the three initiatives do not articulate a fully alternative order, but seek to shift the normative ground on which international debates unfold, weakening liberal assumptions while normalising state-centred and sovereignty-first interpretations of global governance.

5.1 Global Development Initiative

In September 2021, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Xi Jinping announced the GDI at the UN General Assembly, presenting it as a contribution to development and poverty reduction.[218] According to the accompanying concept paper, China stated that in the priority areas identified for the GDI it would coordinate and cooperate with UN organisations and hold annual summit meetings in order to build an international consensus in support of development cooperation and the GDI.[219] Subsequently, the GDI gained traction quickly, including through the establishment of a UN-based "Group of Friends", annual ministerial meetings, and high-level forums in Beijing.

The Chinese government's official justification for launching the GDI is that it is intended to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. One might reasonably ask why China would

[217] Marina Rudyak, "Multilateralism", in *Decoding China Dictionary*, 3nd ed. (The Decoding China Project, 2025), https://decodingchina.eu/key-term/multilateralism/.

[218] "Bolstering Confidence and Jointly Overcoming Difficulties To Build a Better World. Statement by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China At the General Debate of the 76th Session of The United Nations General Assembly", 21.9.2021, https://estatements.unmeetings.org/estatements/10.0010/20210921/AT2JoAvm71nq/KaLk3d9ECB53_en.pdf.

[219] "Global Development Initiative – Building on 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Global Development (Concept Paper)", 21.9.2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/jj/GDI_140002/wj/202406/P020240606606193448267.pdf.

pursue this goal through a new initiative rather than simply advocating more strongly for faster progress within existing UN frameworks? The answer lies in the fact that the GDI is not primarily about development as such, but about forging a "consensus for development".[220] The GDI functions less as a clearly defined strategy or institutional structure than as a multifunctional political slogan – a mobilisation campaign aimed at rallying domestic and international actors around China's development vision and broader global ambitions. Like the BRI, it is loosely institutionalised, operates through ad hoc platforms and non-binding memoranda of understanding (MoUs), and incorporates many projects that predated the initiative but were subsequently rebranded.

At the same time, with the GDI China has achieved something that proved elusive under the BRI: anchoring the initiative within the United Nations system. Framed around "small but beautiful" projects focused on poverty reduction, the GDI met with broad approval and enabled China to conclude MoUs with multiple UN organisations – including FAO, UNDP, UNICEF, UNAIDS, UNIDO, and the UN Office for South–South Cooperation – as well as global NGOs such as the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations and the International Red Cross. Through the UN-based "Group of Friends" and these institutional linkages, Beijing has demonstrated its capacity to convene international actors and place GDI-related priorities on the UN agenda.

This recognition is important for Beijing. In the first *Global Development Report*, produced by the State Council–affiliated Center for International Knowledge on Development (CIKD), China presents its convening capacity as evidence of broad international support for the GDI.[221]

While the GDI appears at first glance to focus on conventional development issues, its political dimension sits uneasily with the values and priorities of the EU. A key term that runs through every official Chinese statement on the initiative is "consensus". This notion recurs in formulations such as "building consensus", "consolidating consensus", or "reaching consensus." China's ambassador to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, put it as follows in 2023:

> *China will push for international efforts to consolidate and expand consensus on development and keep development front and center on the global agenda.*[222]

Yet among DAC donor countries, a consensus on development already exists. It is precisely this consensus that they have seen – and continue to see – as being acutely challenged by China's model of development finance, as outlined at the beginning of Chapter 4 with reference to China's engagement in the Global South. The EU, too, has articulated a shared consensus on its development policy, adopting a common framework in 2017 under the title *"Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future."*[223]

[220] "Full Text: Beijing Statement for the First High-Level Conference of the Forum on Global Action for Shared Development", Xinhua, 7.11.2023, https://english.news.cn/20230711/6a2e37db88e94099a872985cde8c52e8/c.html.
[221] CIKD, *Progress Report on the Global Development Initiative* (2023), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/jj/GDI_140002/wj/202406/P020240606606196155121.pdf. What is left unmentioned in the Report, however, is that all official UN statements issued in the name of the GDI – for example on food security in developing countries in the context of the war in Ukraine – were delivered by China's ambassador to the United Nations. This underlines once again that the GDI "Group of Friends" is a process led and driven by China rather than a genuinely multilateral initiative.
[222] "Proposal of the People's Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance", United Nations General Assembly, 22.9.2023, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4022328/files/A_78_379-EN.pdf.
[223] *The New European Consensus on Development. 'Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future'.*, Joint Statement by the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States Meeting Within the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission (2017), https://international-

What kind of "consensus" does China seek to build – and do China and the EU have the same understanding in mind when they speak of a "consensus for development"? To answer this question, it is useful to look at the relevant policy documents. A comparison shows that there are overlaps at the thematic level. The EU's primary objective in development policy is the reduction and long-term eradication of poverty.[224] The GDI likewise identifies poverty alleviation as its first priority.[225]

Beyond these similarities, however, there are substantial differences. The EU regards the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals as the central political framework for overcoming poverty at the global level.[226] This agenda integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development and recognises the essential interlinkages between its goals. The GDI, by contrast, emphasises that poverty eradication must take the highest priority in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda – implicitly treating the agenda in its current form as insufficient.[227] To achieve this goal, China calls for synergies between the 2030 Agenda and initiatives such as the BRI, the African Union's Agenda 2063, and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). That China places a strong focus on Africa could be viewed positively. Yet this raises an obvious question: why does China not simply push for more effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda – which it has itself endorsed – rather than establishing new initiatives of its own and demanding synergies with Chinese-led programmes? And what underlying assumptions about poverty reduction guide China's approach?

The principles and values underpinning EU development policy are

> *democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, equality and solidarity, as well as adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter of 1945 and international law.*[228]

When Xi Jinping introduced the GDI at the UN General Assembly in September 2021, he likewise emphasised that

> *we should uphold the common values of humanity – peace, development, equality, justice, democracy, and freedom […] and protect and promote human rights through development.*[229]

However, while the EU treats human rights as universally valid and indivisible, China speaks instead of "country-specific paths to the promotion of human rights."

The GDI thus advances a counter-consensus, one that privileges sovereignty, national development paths, and regime stability, while portraying alternative approaches as ideologically intrusive.

The consequence of this divergence is not that cooperation between the EU, or UN organisations and China in the field of development should be avoided per se – there are many areas in which developing countries can benefit from trilateral cooperation involving China. What should be avoided, however, is the signing of

partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6134a7a4-3fcf-46c2-b43a-664459e08f51_en?filename=european-consensus-on-development-final-20170626_en.pdf.

[224] In accordance with Article 208 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU.

[225] "Global Development Initiative (Concept Paper)".

[226] The New European Consensus on Development.

[227] "Global Development Initiative (Concept Paper)".

[228] Article 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU.

[229] "Bolstering Confidence and Jointly Overcoming Difficulties to Build a Better World. Statement by H. E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China."

memoranda of understanding under the banner of the GDI. Actors that formally subscribe to Beijing's conceptual framing risk being positioned, deliberately or not, within China's broader narrative project – one that seeks to normalise a sovereignty-first, state-centred understanding of development while weakening rights-based and governance-oriented approaches.

5.2 Global Security Initiative

Half a year after unveiling the GDI, China introduced yet another global initiative. On 21 April 2022, Xi Jinping presented the Global Security Initiative (GSI) at the Boao Forum for Asia, framing it as China's contribution to "promoting common security in the world."[230] In Western capitals, Xi's speech initially received little attention, as political focus was overwhelmingly directed towards Russia's escalating war in Ukraine. Yet, as Chinese diplomats and government-aligned analysts emphasised in the months that followed, the GSI marked a fundamental shift in Chinese foreign policy. Beyond its policy content, the GSI is significant because it advances a redefinition of security itself, embedding Chinese understandings of sovereignty, order, and risk into global security discourse.

Initially, only limited details were released about the GSI – a typical feature of Chinese political campaigns. It was not until ten months later, in February 2023, that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a concept paper explaining the initiative.[231] According to this document, the GSI rests on six guiding principles, officially translated as the "six commitments": (i) pursuing common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security; (ii) respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; (iii) upholding the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; (iv) taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously; (v) resolving differences and disputes between states peacefully through dialogue and consultation; and (vi) ensuring security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.[232]

Most of these principles have long been part of Chinese foreign policy and reflect a state-centred understanding of security. In this view, states – not individuals – are the primary subjects and beneficiaries of international security. This perspective underpins China's principle of non-interference and provides the rhetorical foundation for justifying, for example, repression in Xinjiang as a necessary measure to safeguard national security, while portraying international criticism as an infringement on China's sovereignty.

It is therefore likely no coincidence that China released the document *"U.S. Hegemony and Its Perils"* on the day preceding the publication of the GSI concept paper.[233] The document accuses the United States of sustaining its hegemony through interference in the internal affairs of other states, the orchestration of "colour revolutions", the fuelling of conflicts, and the pursuit of its own interests under the guise of democracy

[230] "President Xi Jinping's Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of BFA Annual Conference 2022", *China Daily*, 21.4.2022, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202204/21/WS6260db59a310fd2b29e585e3.html.
[231] "The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper", PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21.2.2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367484.html.
[232] Most of these principles have long been part of Chinese foreign policy. The "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" include mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual renunciation of aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, and equality and mutual benefit in peaceful coexistence. The emphasis on the central role of the UN and the UN Charter, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and the focus on non-traditional security issues date back to Jiang Zemin's "New Security Concept" of the mid-1990s, which was developed in the post–Cold War context. A more detailed discussion can be found in M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Global Security Initiative at Two: A Journey, Not a Destination", *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 80 (June 2024), https://www.prcleader.org/post/china-s-global-security-initiative-at-two-a-journey-not-a-destination.
[233] "US Hegemony and Its Perils", China Daily, 21.2.2023, //global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202302/21/WS63f3ff70a31057c47ebafd36.html.

and human rights. The message is clear: while the United States is portrayed as applying international rules selectively, imposing sanctions, and undermining global stability through "bloc politics" and ideological confrontation, China presents the GSI as an inclusive security approach designed to counter precisely these practices.

At the operational level, China promotes closer cooperation in areas such as counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, biosecurity, emerging technologies – including the "Safe City" platforms developed by Huawei[234] – and international policing. These efforts are intended to strengthen China's image as a responsible global actor, while also helping to diffuse Chinese security standards, protect Chinese investments and nationals abroad, and demonstrate to the domestic population that their security is safeguarded worldwide. At the same time, technology transfer and the integration of Chinese technicians into foreign security agencies provide China with intelligence access and enable the monitoring of Chinese citizens overseas. These operational practices are accompanied by a narrative that frames Chinese security technologies as neutral, technical solutions to shared problems, thereby obscuring their political implications and embedding them within the language of "common security".

Through security cooperation – particularly in the "Global South" – China seeks to position itself narratively as a neutral and responsible security provider, deliberately contrasted with what it depicts as a "declining" and destabilising West. Yet the GSI's core concepts contain a fundamental tension that becomes visible precisely at the level of narrative struggle. On the one hand, the initiative promotes the idea of "common" or "indivisible" security, according to which the security of any one state is inseparable from that of all others. On the other hand, it insists on respect for "legitimate security interests". What counts as a "legitimate security interest", however, is inherently subjective and politically constructed. This semantic openness is not accidental: it creates discursive room to normalise the security claims of powerful states while delegitimising those of others, without openly violating the language of international law. As the war in Ukraine illustrates, this tension allows the principle of indivisible security to be rhetorically invoked while being substantively undermined.[235] The prominence of "indivisible security" and "major countries" in the GSI mirrors Russian justifications for its actions in Ukraine, illustrating how shared narrative vocabularies can travel across contexts and be repurposed to legitimise power politics under the cover of inclusive security language. For external observers, this ambiguity complicates detection and attribution, because the same language of "common security" can plausibly justify contradictory actions, making narrative shifts visible only over time rather than as discrete incidents. Although framed as a special responsibility to uphold international justice, this designation introduces a hierarchical logic into what is presented as an inclusive security order. It creates discursive space for China to deploy the notions of "respect for legitimate interests" and "indivisible security" strategically, in order to justify its own interests – or those of its partners – vis-à-vis other states. This carries the risk that "major countries" could act as an alliance of autocracies, mutually legitimising their dominance over their own populations and over smaller states.[236] It also raises the question of whether, in the order promoted by China, "major countries" are entitled to claim greater rights, while smaller states are expected to defer to the security interests of the more powerful. This, too, stands in tension with the proclaimed ideal of "common security" and risks entrenching structural inequalities between large and small states under the guise of inclusivity.

[234] See Marina Rudyak, *China's International Development Cooperation. History, Development Finance Apparatus, and Case Studies from Africa* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023): ch. 6, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/international/20810.pdf.
[235] Fravel, "China's Global Security Initiative at Two", p. 4.
[236] Ka Lok Yip, "Reading China's Global Security Initiative Through an International Legal Lens", *Chinese Journal of Transnational Law* 1, no. 2 (2024): 198–210, https://doi.org/10.1177/2753412X241240259.

More precisely, Chinese government-affiliated scholars describe the GSI as an externalisation of China's national security strategy – specifically of the "Comprehensive National Security Concept" (总体国家安全观). As the name suggests, this concept is indeed comprehensive. The CCP Central Committee defines it as encompassing the protection of "political, military, national, economic, cultural, social, technological, cyber, ecological, resource, nuclear, maritime, space, deep-sea, polar and biological security, as well as other domains."[237] Within this framing, the GSI is presented as the "concrete implementation of the Comprehensive National Security Concept in Chinese diplomacy", as analysts at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) – the think tank of the Ministry of State Security – put it.[238] Feng Weijiang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences similarly describes the GSI as a "vertical extension" of the Comprehensive National Security Concept and as a mechanism for "coordinating China's internal security with the common security of the world".[239] The underlying assumption is that China's national security is inseparable from global security – and that shaping the international security architecture in line with the GSI therefore constitutes a core Chinese national interest.[240]

Behind statements like these lies a worldview shaped by a sense of growing risks and uncertainty. One expression of this perception is the phrase frequently used by Chinese officials that the world is undergoing "great changes unseen in a century". While Western analysts often read this formulation as an expression of confidence – or even triumph – about China's rise, in official Chinese discourse it points instead to the idea that opportunities are invariably accompanied by expanding dangers. This is evident in a statement by the CCP Central Committee in November 2021, which warned that China was facing "unprecedented external risks and challenges" and that the country's ability to safeguard national security was "not yet fully adequate to meet the requirements of the current situation".

Viewed in this light, the GSI is less about China providing security for the world. Rather, it is about making the world safe for China – or more precisely, for the CCP. For policymakers and analysts, this implies that engaging with the GSI requires attention not only to concrete cooperation proposals, but to the evolving meanings of security through which Chinese interests are normalised and alternative interpretations marginalised.

5.3 Global Civilisation Initiative

The Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) was introduced by Xi Jinping on 15 March 2023 in his opening speech at the Dialogue between the CCP and the Political Parties of the World. Xi stated:

> *A single flower does not make spring, but a hundred flowers in full bloom bring spring to the garden. As the future of all countries is closely interconnected, tolerance, coexistence, exchange, and mutual learning among different civilisations play an irreplaceable role in*

[237] Katja Drinhausen and Helena Lagarda, "'Comprehensive National Security' Unleashed: How Xi's Approach Shapes China's Policies at Home and Abroad", *MERICS China Monitor*, 15.9.2022, https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/Merics%20China%20Monitor%2075%20National%20Security_final.pdf.

[238] Chen Xiangyang 陈向阳 et al., "Deep Comprehension of the Global Security Initiative: Coordinating Our Own Security and Common Security", Interpret: China, 5.9.2022, https://interpret.csis.org/translations/deep-comprehension-of-the-global-security-initiative-coordinating-our-own-security-and-common-security/.

[239] Feng Weijiang 冯维江, "The Theoretical Foundation of the Global Security Initiative – The Holistic View of National Security", Interpret: China, 16.6.2022, https://interpret.csis.org/translations/the-theoretical-foundation-of-the-global-security-initiative-the-holistic-view-of-national-security/.

[240] Ibid.

> *advancing the modernization of humanity and in bringing the garden of world civilisations into full bloom. In this spirit, I would like to propose the Global Civilisation Initiative.*[241]

From a semantic-battles perspective, the GCI is best understood as an attempt to redefine the meaning of "civilisation", "modernisation", and "universal values" in global discourse, and to displace Western liberal interpretations with a pluralist framing that ultimately privileges sovereignty and regime autonomy.

The image of the "hundred flowers" stems from a Ming-dynasty anthology, and Xi has used it repeatedly before, including to promote economic globalisation. One might be tempted to dismiss this as rhetorical kitsch, were it not for the political sensitivity the metaphor of a "garden of world civilisations" had recently acquired in the EU context. In October 2022, the EU's then High Representative Josep Borrell compared Europe to a garden and much of the rest of the world to a jungle in a speech at the inauguration of the European Diplomatic Academy in Bruges.

> *Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden. The gardeners should take care of it, but they will not protect the garden by building walls. A nice small garden surrounded by high walls in order to prevent the jungle from coming in is not going to be a solution. Because the jungle has a strong growth capacity, and the wall will never be high enough in order to protect the garden. The gardeners have to go to the jungle.*[242]

The metaphor – intended to argue that Europeans needed to engage more actively with the world – triggered a major backlash on social media, especially given Europe's colonial history. The imagery was widely read – especially in the Global South – as reproducing a hierarchical distinction between a "civilised" Europe and a "wild" rest of the world. It is precisely against this backdrop of heightened sensitivity to hierarchical civilisational language that Xi Jinping's invocation of a "garden of world civilisations" acquired strategic resonance. The metaphor operates as a counter-narrative: where Western discourse was read as implicitly hierarchical, China positions itself as the advocate of civilisational equality and mutual learning – while subtly redefining the terms on which modernity and legitimacy are judged. By explicitly celebrating civilisational diversity and "multiple paths to modernisation", Beijing positions itself as the antithesis to Western universalism. Yet, this should not be mistaken for a lack of missionary ambition. The CCP presents itself as committed to "advancing the progress of human civilisation", while portraying "Chinese-style modernisation" as a "new form of human civilisation".[243] In parallel with the launch of the GCI, the state newspaper Global Times even rolled out an entirely unironic "Xi-vilisation" series celebrating the Chinese leader's views on global culture.

But what does the GCI actually entail? In his speech, Xi outlines four main points. First, he argues that ideological universalism imposed without consent amounts to imperialism and is therefore unacceptable. Countries should "refrain from imposing their own values or models on others and from stirring up ideological confrontation". Second, each civilisation should find its own path to and through the process of modernisation, and the differences that result from this must be respected: "Countries and regions around the world have

[241] Xi Jinping, "Marching Hand in Hand on the Road to Modernisation - Keynote Speech at the High-Level Dialogue between the CCP and World Political Parties" (携手同行现代化之路--在中国共产党与世界政党高层对话会上的主旨讲话), CPC News, 15.3.2023, http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0316/c64094-32645371.html.

[242] "European Diplomatic Academy: Opening Remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the Inauguration of the Pilot Programme", 13.10.2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration-pilot_en.

[243] Xi Jinping, "Marching Hand in Hand on the Road to Modernisation".

chosen different paths to modernisation, rooted in their unique and centuries-old civilisations." There is no exclusive association between any particular civilisation and a specific path to modernisation. Every form of modernisation draws its strengths and distinctive features from multiple civilisations, and "China's modernisation will draw on the achievements of other civilisations and make the garden of world civilisations more diverse and vibrant." Third, the GCI aims at equality based on civilisational pluralism. It calls for "respect for the diversity of civilisations", and for relations among civilisations to be grounded in the "principles of equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusiveness". The fourth and final point is transcendence: "let cultural exchange overcome estrangement, mutual learning bridge conflict, and coexistence overcome feelings of superiority."[244]

At its core, the GCI reflects a concern with a potential "clash of civilisations" in the sense described by Samuel Huntington, one in which China sees itself engaged in an intensifying geopolitical rivalry with the United States. The GCI functions as a rhetorical instrument to challenge and delegitimise Western discourse on the "rules-based international order", particularly its inherent claim to universalism. This rejection of Western universalism echoes Russian narratives that portray liberal norms as culturally contingent and politically coercive, while advancing an alternative vision of a plural international order grounded in civilisational sovereignty. Rather than presenting its approach merely as one alternative among many, however, the CCP frames Chinese-style modernisation as a universally relevant direction of development. Accordingly, *Qiushi*, the Party's most authoritative theoretical journal, has argued that Chinese-style modernisation "represents the developmental direction of the progress of human civilisation". In doing so, the article explicitly links Xi Jinping's February 2023 assertion that "China's progress broken the myth that modernisation means westernisation"[245] with the Global Civilisation Initiative:

> *The break with the myth that modernisation equals Westernisation will inevitably encourage many developing countries to explore their own paths to modernisation. […] To promote civilisational exchanges and mutual learning, advance the progress of human civilisations, and support the global modernisation process, Xi proposed a comprehensive Global Civilisation Initiative. This is another Chinese proposal to promote a Community of shared future for mankind, based on observing, understanding and shaping the developments of the times with the perspectives, views and methods of the Party's innovative theories.*[246]

The core objective of the GCI is therefore not civilisational pluralism as such, but a semantic reconfiguration of universalism – one that rejects Western liberal modernity and purportedly universal values while advancing Chinese-style modernisation as a universally relevant alternative. The Chinese government promotes the language of diversity, but only insofar as it is coupled with an uncompromising emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference. Resentment towards any form of criticism of Beijing, particularly regarding its human rights record, runs deep. What at first glance appears to be a plea for mutual respect and tolerance primarily serves to delegitimise criticism of China's domestic affairs. The underlying message is that modern societies may – and should – adopt different political systems and values, without any universal norm determining what is

[244] See Barry Buzan and Feng Zhang, "Multiple Modernities in Civilizational Perspective: An Assessment of the Global Civilization(s) Initiative", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 17, no. 1 (2024): 104–26, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poae006.

[245] Xi Jinping, "Marching Hand in Hand on the Road to Modernisation".

[246] Feng Yuzhang 冯虞章, "Research into the Historical Logic of the Modernisation Process in Human Societies" (探究人类社会现代化进程的历史逻辑), *Qiushi*, 28.4.2023, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwg/2023-04/28/c_1129576019.htm.

right or wrong. Unlike Russia's more inward-looking and defensive civilisational narrative, the GCI is explicitly outward-facing and programmatic: it seeks not merely to defend China's distinctiveness, but to position Chinese-style modernisation as a reference point for others.

Finally, the very name of the initiative raises a set of unresolved questions. Is there, in fact, a meaningful distinction between a country and a civilisation? Are all states considered civilisations, or only some – perhaps historically imperial ones among China's illiberal partners, such as Russia or Iran? Is Ukraine framed as a "country" or as a "civilisation"? How is the concept of "civilisation" perceived in regions shaped by experiences of colonialism, such as Latin America or Africa? And how much traditional culture is allowed to survive in the course of modernisation – or, conversely, how much of it is criminalised, as has occurred in Xinjiang and Tibet? As the experience of the Uyghurs in China illustrates, in a totalitarian system it is the ruling party that defines how a culture is to be "modernised": deciding which practices are suppressed or outlawed, and which are allowed to survive as sanitised, depoliticised artefacts, displayed in museums or performed at folklore festivals.

While Xi speaks of the diversity of civilisations, the official English translation renders the Chinese term *wenming* (文明) in the singular: *Global Civilisation Initiative*.[247] That is, one civilisation rather than many. Chinese does not grammatically distinguish between singular and plural, but what may initially appear to be a translation inconsistency is therefore not necessarily accidental. As with the Global Security Initiative, the underlying concern is ultimately Party regime security. If Chinese-style modernisation, as Xi Jinping stated in Boao, constitutes a "new form" – or even the pinnacle – of human civilisation, the question becomes what defines this modernisation as such. The Party's answer is both clear and concise: "Chinese-style modernisation is socialist modernisation under the leadership of the CCP." Its success or failure thus hinges on Party leadership, while ordinary Chinese citizens appear largely as bystanders in the process. In that, the Chinese and Russian civilisational narratives differ in tone and orientation. Whereas Russian discourse tends to be defensive, inward-looking, and framed around existential threat and cultural siege, the GCI is outward-facing and programmatic, presenting Chinese-style modernisation as a globally relevant reference point rather than merely a protected national path.

Seen through the lens of semantic battles and narrative contestation, the Global Civilisation Initiative functions less as a celebration of diversity than as an attempt to reshape the global vocabulary of modernity itself – redefining civilisation, relativising universal norms, and embedding regime security within a discourse of pluralism and mutual respect.

5.4 Manufacturing Consensus for the Community of Shared Future?

The notion of a "Community of shared future for mankind" and the three global initiatives – the GDI, GSI, and GCI – are not merely diplomatic slogans. They constitute a coordinated effort to wage semantic battles over how key concepts such as development, security, civilisation, and international order are defined and understood. Through these initiatives, Beijing seeks to shape a global narrative space in which China's preferred meanings and interpretive frames gain legitimacy, while competing – largely Western – understandings are relativised or delegitimised. The "Community of shared future" is closely linked to the ideological narrative of China's national rejuvenation; it functions as the global extension of the Chinese Dream and as a discursive vehicle for projecting domestic governance principles outward. As early as 2017, the Party journal *Qiushi* stated that "to realise the Chinese Dream, the Party must advance the building of a Community

[247] Because Chinese does not grammatically distinguish between singular and plural, what appears at first glance to be a translation choice may in fact be deliberate rather than erroneous.

of shared future for mankind", explicitly linking China's internal political project to a reconfiguration of global governance through language and norms.[248]

Central to this effort is a staged process of narrative construction and consensus-building.[249] In the first phase, China introduces new concepts with broad moral appeal and minimal political specificity. Terms such as "development", "security", and "civilisation" are deliberately underdefined, allowing multiple readings while displacing existing meanings embedded in liberal international discourse. This ambiguity is not accidental but enables semantic flexibility: positive associations are activated while the political implications remain open. In the second phase, international conferences, dialogues, and multilateral formats – especially within the United Nations – are used to circulate these concepts and to normalise their vocabulary. Chinese diplomats and officials work to insert CCP formulations into UN language, resolutions, and reports, thereby shifting the semantic baseline of global governance discussions. The third phase involves narrative consolidation: once terms have gained sufficient traction, their meanings are gradually specified through policy proposals, implementation frameworks, and institutional practices that reflect China's strategic preferences.

This pattern was already evident in the Belt and Road Initiative, which evolved from a loosely framed connectivity narrative into a multifunctional platform encompassing infrastructure, finance, standards-setting, and political signalling. The GDI, GSI, and GCI follow a similar discursive trajectory. Each was introduced by Xi Jinping in highly symbolic settings – the UN General Assembly, the Boao Forum, and the CCP's dialogue with political parties worldwide – and embedded from the outset in the language of the Chinese Dream and the Community of shared future. These speeches did not merely announce policy initiatives; they positioned China as a normative agenda-setter and framed global challenges through Chinese conceptual lenses.

Importantly, this process remains deliberately vague at crucial stages. Vagueness functions as a strategic asset in semantic battles: it allows China to adapt narratives to different audiences and contexts while avoiding explicit commitments that could expose contradictions between rhetoric and practice. This openness increases the appeal of Chinese narratives, particularly in the Global South, where dissatisfaction with existing global arrangements creates receptiveness to alternative framings. At the same time, the initiatives operate as instruments of narrative contestation, challenging established interpretations of development, security, and governance. The recurrent formula that "security is the prerequisite for development, and development the guarantee of security" exemplifies this logic: it reorders causal assumptions and legitimises a governance model that prioritises state control and stability over liberal norms of political pluralism and individual rights.

For European actors, the significance of these initiatives lies less in their immediate policy outputs than in their cumulative discursive effects. China's approach does not seek to impose a fully articulated alternative order overnight. Instead, it aims to reshape the semantic environment in which international politics is debated, gradually altering what appears reasonable, legitimate, and consensual. The narrative of a Community of shared future functions as the overarching frame through which these semantic shifts are advanced – making it a central site of contestation in the broader struggle over meaning, norms, and world-making in international politics.

[248] Han Zhenfeng 韩振峰, "The Chinese Dream Is the Most Magnificent Aspiration of the Chinese Nation in Modern Times" (中国梦是中华民族近代以来最伟大的梦想), *Qiushi*, 1.12.2017, http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1201/c40531-29679404.html.

[249] Kevin Rudd, On Xi Jinping: How Xi's Marxist Nationalism Is Shaping China and the World (Oxford University Press Inc, 2024): p. 245-255.

6. Summary of Findings and Implications

The empirical chapters served to illustrate the working paper's core theoretical claim that semantic battles and narrative contestations are not epiphenomena but practices of worldmaking through which China and Russia seek to renegotiate hierarchy, legitimacy and order in international politics. In both cases, Discursive projects such as China's "Community of shared future for mankind" and Russia's "Russkiy mir" and struggles over the meaning of terms such as "sovereignty", "security", "democracy", "human rights", "rules-based order" and "civilisation" are treated as central arenas in which status is claimed, responsibility is shifted and alternative normative horizons are sketched. It furthermore shows that struggles over the meaning of key terms and categories, and struggles over the broader storylines into which those terms are woven. Chinese discourse on "true multilateralism", "Community of shared future" and "Chinese-style modernisation", and Russian discourse on the "Russian world", "Russophobia" and "Nazism" in Ukraine, illustrate how definitional work on core concepts is embedded in larger narratives about past injustice, present danger and future order, without the two dimensions always being sharply separable in practice.

Methodologically, the combination of elite texts (strategic concepts, Party/theoretical journals, leader speeches) with public diplomatic output (MFA briefings, Xinhua and other state media) is well suited to tracing how abstract notions travel into concrete crisis communication. Reading the Chinese and Russian corpora through the same guiding questions – What international order is imagined? Which enemies and threats are constructed? Which key terms are redefined? – enables structured comparison without assuming symmetry between a party-state pursuing long-term discourse power and a personalist regime at war. The Ukraine case study in particular suggests that case-based, contextualised analysis is necessary to see when discourses merely run in parallel and when they are actively aligned, borrowed or selectively amplified.

At the same time, the approach has limitations that should be made explicit. The conceptual lens of "semantic battles" and "narrative contestations" casts a deliberately wide net, which requires careful differentiation from more routine or technocratic forms of official rhetoric. The focus on elite, producer-side texts also entail an inherent limitation: the analysis does not examine how these narratives are received by audiences, nor how they are reinterpreted, simplified, or transformed as they circulate through broader information environments, such as domestic media, social platforms, or even political debates. These downstream dynamics are addressed elsewhere in the project, notably in Deliverable D3.3, which analyses how FIMI-related content is classified, adapted, and disseminated by domestic actors. With the partial exception of the case study on the Global Development Initiative, which briefly addresses how narratives are amplified through UN platforms, the present paper therefore concentrates on the upstream construction of meaning and narrative intent, rather than on patterns of diffusion or audience reception.

Across the country chapters and the Ukraine case, significant common ground emerges. Both governments see semantic battles and narrative contestations as integral to great-power status and regime security, and both present themselves as resisting a "Western" or "US-led" discourse hegemony. In their respective ways, China and Russia seek to provincialise liberal universalism by insisting on civilisational pluralism, the sovereign equality of states, "true multilateralism" (China) or "multipolarity" (Russia) and UN-centred legality, even as they stretch these concepts to legitimise their own preferences. Both invert external threat narratives – the "China threat theory" on the one hand and "Russophobia" and the "Russian threat" on the other – reframing fear of their rise as a projection of Western hegemonic anxiety rather than as a response to their own policies.

Civilisational language is central in both cases. China's notions of a "Community of shared future", "Chinese-style modernisation" and, more recently, the Global Civilisation Initiative recast geopolitical competition as a benign competition between civilisational paths to modernity, while implicitly claiming that Chinese modernity represents a "new form" or even the developmental direction of human civilisation. Russian elites similarly mobilise ideas of a distinct "Russian world" and a particular Russian civilisation, now increasingly couched in anti-colonial and anti-fascist rhetoric, to challenge Western claims to normative universality and to justify alternative models of regional order in the post-Soviet space. In both discourses, external criticism – especially on human rights – is delegitimised as interference and instrumentalised as evidence of Western double standards and containment strategies.

The paper also identifies systematic differences in how these shared semantic goals are pursued. At the level of narrative grammar, Chinese discourse is more forward-looking, legal-institutional and developmental: semantic battles are typically embedded in stories of "peaceful development", "win–win cooperation", "global development" and "a community of shared future", with frequent references to the UN Charter, "true multilateralism" and "democratisation of international relations". Deep history (a "5,000-year civilisation") is used to underwrite a teleology of rejuvenation and modernisation, presenting time as on China's side and conflict as something to be managed within a gradually reformed order. By contrast, Russian discourse is more backward- and crisis-oriented, organised around loss, rupture and imminent catastrophe: the "tragedy" of the Soviet collapse, the restoration of "historical Russia", civilisational decline of the West, siege and encirclement, "genocide" and "Nazism" in Ukraine. Russian discourse often presents the situation as acute and exceptional, depicting a narrowing window to avert disaster, which is used to justify pre-emptive, risk-acceptant and violent measures in the name of survival.

The case of the war in Ukraine helps to illustrate how this enabling dynamic operates in practice. The empirical chapter shows that China does not operate as a simple narrative follower of Russia, but advances a position that is selectively aligned and strategically differentiated. Beijing reiterates several Russia-compatible frames – such as criticism of NATO enlargement, references to the "legitimate security concerns of all parties", and opposition to unilateral sanctions—while deliberately avoiding Russia's most extreme war rhetoric, including explicit denial of Ukrainian statehood or openly genocidal language. At the same time, China consistently reframes the conflict through its own conceptual vocabulary. This combination of partial alignment and discursive restraint illustrates how China contributes to normalising key Russian-compatible interpretations without fully adopting Russia's narrative, thereby expanding the interpretive space in which Moscow's claims can circulate while preserving Beijing's diplomatic flexibility – particularly vis-à-vis Europe.

Finally, the theoretical framework is more tightly anchored in Chinese source concepts (such as *huayuquan* and "telling China's story well") than in native Russian vocabularies, reflecting differences in source accessibility and discursive institutionalisation rather than an absence of Russian worldmaking practices. These limitations do not detract from the paper's findings, but clarify its scope: the analysis is intended as a qualitative complement to incident-based and computational approaches developed elsewhere in the project.

The second case study on the Community of Shared Future develops the worldmaking dynamics identified in Chapter 2 by showing how Chinese leaders extend semantic battles and narrative contestations into a long-horizon, programmatic register. Rather than confining narrative contestation to specific conflicts or incidents, Beijing uses the "Community" to redefine core concepts such as "civilisation", "modernisation", "universal values", and the "progress of human civilisation". Through this initiative, Chinese-style modernisation is articulated not merely as one possible path among many, but increasingly as a "new form" and developmental

direction of human civilisation, while the language of diversity, pluralism, and non-interference serves to deflect external normative scrutiny of China's domestic order.

Taken together, the findings of this paper suggest that analysing FIMI through the lens of worldmaking, semantic battles, and narrative repertoires adds a missing interpretive layer to existing detection- and attribution-centred approaches such as DISARM. Rather than replacing incident-level analysis, this perspective helps specify what to look for and how to interpret patterns once detected, particularly in the Chinese case, where influence efforts have so far rarely been organised around discrete falsehoods or high-volume campaigns. The repertoire typology developed here can inform other work packages, in particular Task 4.1, by specifying China-specific frames, concepts, and narrative structures that connect concrete FIMI incidents in Europe – such as reactions to protests, elections, sanctions, or security crises – to the underlying logics of Chinese meaning-making, while also clarifying how these logics intersect with, enable, or condition compatible Russian narratives. It also highlights the importance of tracing when elite-level narratives "drop down" into coordinated campaigns, proxy actors, influencers, or vernacular and memetic content, and when they remain confined to official or semi-official registers. Finally, the analysis opens pathways for systematic cross-context comparison by asking which semantic and narrative moves gain traction in European and partner-country publics, through which intermediaries, and how local actors appropriate, resist, or hybridise them. In this sense, the paper provides a conceptual bridge between high-level discourse analysis and operational FIMI monitoring, particularly strengthening analytical capacity where Chinese influence efforts are slow, indirect, and structurally embedded rather than overtly disruptive.

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