

Background Research
Gates Forum I

China-Russia Strategic Communications: Evolving Visions and Practices

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Introduction

This paper examines Chinese and Russian state-led strategic communications objectives and practices. The analysis starts out by presenting the overarching visions of China and Russia in expanding their external communication capabilities, including how these goals have evolved over time and how the two regimes envision and prioritize their target audiences. The paper then proceeds to engage with major actors charged with implementing these visions in both states, as well as with key strategies that are part of Russia and China's strategic communications toolkit. The final sections address the areas of convergence and divergence in the strategic communications of China and Russia, as well as the effects or implications of their practices, including the reactions of key target audiences and the challenges and opportunities they present to U.S. national interests. Before proceeding to the analysis, it is important to note that the actual term "strategic communications" is not popularized in the two countries, and concepts like soft power, information warfare, external propaganda, and discourse power tend to be used instead. This paper, therefore, draws on these concepts and how they are understood in China and Russia, with a special focus on the varied interpretations of soft power.

Section I: Strategic Objectives

In formulating their strategic communications objectives, Chinese and Russian officials and experts underscore their discontent with Western dominance (and especially with that of the United States) over the international communication system.¹ They also aim to strengthen the relative positioning of their media outlets and, more broadly, their voices in the international system. China approaches this with a dual strategy of persuasion or "selling" of China's story, as well as more defensive push-backs on perceived Western rhetorical attacks. Russian strategy features less persuasion and more counter-propaganda and information warfare against the West. In conceiving their external communication strategic visions, both China and Russia are also driven by domestic audiences and domestic regime legitimacy. China, however, has ambitions for acceptance by the international community and international institutions, whereas

¹ The international communication system primarily refers to the political economy of global communications (i.e. Western news outlets dominating the global media ecosystem), as well as to the agenda-setting power of global communicators (i.e. the West, including politicians and media, setting the discursive agenda). Increasingly, both China and Russia are also concerned about Western dominance of global communication infrastructure.

Russia is more interested in manifesting its exceptionalism and reclaiming a more expansive vision of the “Russian world.” I proceed to examine these arguments in more detail, starting with China’s strategic communications objectives.

China’s Strategic Communications Objectives

China’s top leaders have prioritized the importance of constructing a positive external image over the past three decades. Starting in the mid-2000s, Chinese authorities and experts have enthusiastically adopted Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft power,” incorporated it into high-level speeches, and widely scrutinized it in academic publications (Repnikova 2022). For China to fully rise as a great power, according to Chinese experts, it needs recognition and acceptance by the international community. For instance, Yu Guoming, a well-known Chinese communications expert, argued that the limited acceptance of China compromises its global influence: “The strength of our voice does not match our position in the world. That affects the extent to which China is accepted by the world. If our voice does not match our role, we remain a crippled giant” (Guo and Lye 2011, cited in Zhao 2013). International communication, often officially referred to as “external propaganda,” is seen as an integral part of China’s image-making and recognition.

Over time, the official emphasis on strategic communications has shifted from justifying China’s participation in the international community towards narrating its success story and, more recently, positioning itself as a guide or an inspiration to other countries. These shifts correspond to the Chinese leadership’s evolving perceptions of China’s relative strength and developmental trajectory. These shifts can also be explained by the increasing deterioration in US-China relations and the Chinese government positioning itself as capable of withstanding competition with the United States. Finally, the shifts are linked to the change in China’s leadership. Xi Jinping’s leadership has been more focused on China’s international standing and more reliant on nationalistic politics domestically. I detail these shifts in external communication priorities below, starting with the Jiang Zemin era.

At the 1999 External Propaganda Conference, Jiang Zemin called for presenting a hard-working, reform-oriented image of China (Jiang Zemin Zai Quanguo... 1999). At the 2003 National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference, Hu Jintao stressed

the need to accurately communicate China's position in international affairs and showcase China's economic, political, and intellectual developments (Renmin Ribao 2003). The Hu Jintao era is also when we see the first mention of cultural soft power in top leadership speeches (Hu Jintao Zai Dang... 2007). This rhetorical endorsement was accompanied by a major global expansion of China's state-owned media outlets, with the Chinese government pouring an estimated \$6 billion into this initiative (Cook 2020).

Under Xi Jinping, we have seen a shift towards a more ambitious approach in global communication. During his visit to the country's main media outlets in 2016, Xi Jinping called for journalists to better tell China's story (Yu Danghe Renmin Tonghuxi...2016). In his major external communications speech in 2022, Xi underscored the importance of promoting China's approaches and views on development and global governance (Jiaqiang He Gaijin...2021). Under Xi, China no longer strives to fit into the international community but to position itself as one of the leaders and potential alternatives to the West. The key narrative that China tries to convey is that its vision of the world order is more equitable—the idea is captured by slogans like “community of shared destiny” and “major country diplomacy.” Xi's announcement of the Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative at the UNGA meeting last year embodies these narratives and reveals his aspirations for positioning China as a major power interested in shaping global governance and contributing to international communications, especially in the Global South.

Closely entwined with the mission of persuading the international community about the legitimacy of China's political governance and benevolence of its global engagements, China's strategic communications are also concerned with rebuking the perceived damaging anti-China narratives produced by the West and especially by Western media. The concerns and disillusionment with Western media have built over the past two decades. In recent years under Xi Jinping, we see an expansion in China's more assertive communication. Practicing what is now widely described as “wolf warrior

diplomacy,”² Chinese diplomats deploy both defensive and offensive tactics to counter Western narratives. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, some of China’s diplomatic and state media communications can also be characterized as disinformation.

China’s soft persuasion and defensive communication strategies can be somewhat contradictory. Xi Jinping’s call for shaping a “loveable” image of China conflicts with provocative messaging spread by some Chinese diplomats. These tensions reflect the larger frictions in China’s image-making and strategic communications, as China attempts to carve out a distinct image of itself as a benevolent major power that wants to improve the international system. Yet it fears to appear as weak vis-à-vis the West, and thereby constructs its image in part as a reaction to the West.

Russia’s Evolving Strategic Communications Objectives and Visions

As with China, the idea of soft power resonated with the Russian leadership, starting in the mid-2000s. For Russian experts and officials, the concept was intrinsically linked to the US’s dominant position in the international system, as well as to “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in 2003 through 2005 (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). Putin incorporated this concept into a high-level speech for the first time in 2007 (Putin 2007). During this period, the Russian government also launched a new communications and public diplomacy infrastructure, including Russia’s biggest international broadcaster, RT (launched in 2005), and the Russkiy Mir Foundation (2007), a government-sponsored organization charged with promoting Russian language, history, and culture around the world.

Similarly to China, Russia’s vision for strategic communications has evolved over time in a more assertive direction. Russian officials, however, have placed more emphasis on Western soft power as a threat and have underscored the importance of information

² The concept is associated with the 2015 film titled *Wolf Warrior* and especially its 2017 sequel, *Wolf Warrior II*. Both films present a dramatic action plot about the People’s Liberation Army defending China’s global interests, including in Africa. Initially, the term “wolf warrior” appeared on Chinese social media following the release of the *Wolf Warrior II* film, as a critique of nationalism. Later this term has been deployed by Western commentators to characterize China’s demonstrative assertiveness in the diplomatic arena, especially in cyber diplomacy. Frequent commentaries by China’s official spokespeople, including Zhao Lijian, accusing the United States of double standards and probing at the weaknesses in the US democracy are manifestations of China’s wolf warrior diplomacy.

warfare, in addition to public diplomacy. These shifts towards an overtly anti-Western positioning in Russia's soft power are linked to the domestic legitimization of Putin's regime through a narrative of Russia as a counterweight to the West. The emphasis on external competition (and enemies) facilitates domestic nationalism and unifies the public behind a shared mission of defending Russia's interests. The West, and especially the United States, is also seen as posing increasing risks to Putin's legitimacy, not only as a leader of Russia but also as a leader of the Eurasian region. In the following analysis, I explain Putin's contradictory and combative conception of soft power during the past decade.

Post-2012, Russia's interpretation of soft power increasingly fused self-promotion with self-defense and information warfare against the West. The 2013 influential white paper on foreign policy (*Kontseptsia Vneshnei Politiki...2013*), for instance, describes soft power as at once an "integral part of contemporary international politics" and a potentially destructive instrument (*Kontseptsia Vneshnei Politiki...2013*, p. 7). Similar characterizations of soft power are apparent in Putin's speeches and writings. On the one hand, Putin laments Russia's image as being distorted by others, decries Russia's failure in better explaining its position to the world (Putin 2012b), and calls for more effective diplomacy. At the same time, he repeatedly labels soft power with negative connotations as a tool deployed by other powers for illicit goals of political interference. "Unfortunately, these methods are often used to nurture and provoke extremism, separatism, nationalism...and directly interfere in the internal politics of sovereign states," Putin argued in his pre-election article in *Moskovskie Novosti* (Putin 2012a). Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the influential Russian foreign policy publication, *Russia in Global Affairs*, has described this combination of explaining Russia's vision and defending against the West as "counter-propaganda" (Lukyanov 2014). Russia attempts to communicate its values and visions in large part by framing itself as in opposition to the West.

Counter-propaganda is complemented by more offensive strategies of information warfare (*informatsionnaia voina*) widely advocated in Russia since 2012. Most clearly articulated in the Gerasimov Doctrine, the concept of information warfare calls for the deployment of information tools and strategies to battle enemies by sowing chaos and disorder (Gerasimov, 2013). This more militaristic mission has also been echoed by leading Russian propagandists. RT's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan, in a 2012

interview with the Russian Daily, *Kommersant*, compared her channel to the Ministry of Defense. Referring to the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict, she argued that RT was waging an information war “against the whole Western world” (Gabuev 2012).

In recent years, information warfare has been more prominently featured in high-level rhetoric about strategic communications, with Russia described as being in an existential battle with the West. During a 2021 speech at the FSB, for instance, Putin stressed that Russia is facing deliberate information campaigns against it on a range of issues, including in Russia’s battle against the coronavirus and its accomplishments in the medical sphere (Zasedaniye Kollegii FSB Rossii 2021). At the International Economic Forum in Saint Petersburg in June 2022, Putin portrayed Western predictions about Russia’s economic downfall in response to sanctions as propaganda and psychological warfare against Russian society. He also dismissed these efforts as ineffective (Plenarnoe Zasedanie Peterburgskogo Mezhdunarodnogo Ekonomicheskogo Foruma 2022). Other than directly battling the West, Putin advocates for improving Russia’s image through self-confidence. In response to a question about soft power at the same international forum, Putin said that “the most important thing is to respect ourselves. There is no need to try our hardest to prove to someone that we are good, no need to do that...If we treat ourselves, our history, and culture with respect, people will come to us” (Putin 2022). In 2012, Putin was still committed to explaining Russia correctly to global audiences; in 2022, he appears to have largely abandoned this objective in favor of self-confidence and self-defense.

This section demonstrated that both China and Russia strive to compete for global narratives with the West and especially with the United States. Both regimes have also shifted towards a more nationalistic orientation that translates into more assertive communication objectives and strategies. At the same time, China’s leadership, even under Xi Jinping, is still interested in soft persuasion or co-optation of global publics. By contrast, Russian leadership is less invested in constructing Russia’s image and more focused on de-constructing the legitimacy of the West.

Section II: Target Audiences

For both China and Russia, target audiences include international, diasporic, and domestic publics. It is difficult to ascertain which audiences are most prioritized;

arguably, all three groups are targeted at the same time. When it comes to global publics, there is an emphasis on the West in both Chinese and Russian official discourses, with the West being understood as the most competitive terrain for soft power and strategic communications. Below, I introduce each target audience group in some detail, starting with international audiences.

International and Non-diasporic Audiences

The international audience for Russia and China's strategic communications can be broadly divided into audiences: (1) in the West and other major powers, (2) in neighboring regions, and (3) in the Global South.

In China's high-level official speeches on public diplomacy, there is a notable hierarchy of global priorities. Major countries, including the United States, Russia, and the European Union, are invoked as diplomatic priorities. Neighboring countries present a second-tier priority, driven by China's regional security considerations. Finally, China has significantly expanded its diplomatic outreach to developing countries, especially as part of the Belt and Road initiative and due to Xi's diplomatic concept of a "community of shared destiny."

Some Chinese scholars, like Wu Zhicheng and Liu Peidong, capture the different layers of China's diplomatic outreach as the following: large countries' relations present the key element; neighboring countries are the priority; and developing countries are the fundamentals (Wu and Liu 2022). While it is challenging to measure the geographic distribution of China's soft power and strategic communications resources, it is notable how, at least up until the recent escalation in US-China relations under President Trump, much of China's diplomatic capability was oriented towards the United States (and the West more broadly). My interviews with Chinese state media professionals revealed that the top talent was sent to the US. Until recently, the United States was also home to the largest number of China's Confucius Institutes (at its peak, there were 110 Confucius Institutes in the US; this number decreased to about 20 by 2021).³

³ Please see:

http://china-dashboard.aiddata.org/#/?aggregate_type=sum&data_type=annual&diplomacy_type=1&elite_visit_types=35%2C36%2C37%2C38&geographies=191&geography_type=country&max_year=2021&min_year=2004&per_capita_type=absolute&selected_view=line&tech_assist_types=39%2C40%2C41%2C42.

As for neighboring countries, China is highly invested in strengthening its soft power there, including via communications outreach, in large part because it sees them as pivotal for upholding regional security. China is also competing with the United States for leadership in the Asia-Pacific and in Southeast Asia, and it deploys strategic communications as part of this competition. During the pandemic, for instance, the Chinese government combined extensive pandemic aid with strategic communications through local media outlets and social media platforms to promote a positive story about China's handling of the pandemic.⁴

With China's expansive economic presence in developing countries (especially in Africa), the Chinese government has also ramped up its communications outreach there over the past decade, in part to battle Western narratives about neocolonialism. Some experts argue that since the launch of the BRI, the Chinese government has redirected external propaganda resources from Western developed countries towards developing countries (Wang 2022). In 2012, for instance, China's state television broadcaster, CGTN, launched a regional bureau in Nairobi, and the Chinese government now trains thousands of African journalists as part of its strategic communications effort, amongst other initiatives.

For the Kremlin, the West constitutes a key target of competition for narratives and information warfare. Unlike China, which targets all Western audiences, Russia focuses on communicating with marginalized publics (on both the left and the right of the political spectrum) whose opinions are less featured in the current system (Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody 2021). RT (formerly known as *Russia Today*), for instance, frequently relies on conspiracy theories to provoke discord and questioning of the status quo. RT also routinely invites public figures from extreme political spectrums on its talk shows to probe into the weaknesses of American society and political governance. These techniques are part of an effort to exacerbate existing societal divisions in the US and in other major democracies.

Starting in 2012, as Russia's leadership announced a pivot towards Asia, China and India were also highlighted as diplomatic priorities (Kontseptsiya Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federstsii, 2013; Kontseptsiya Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federstsii, 2016). As a result,

⁴ See: <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/chinese-diplomacy-southeast-asia-during-covid-19-pandemic>

there are signs of Russia's more expansive communication outreach to these countries. Since 2020, for instance, China and Russia have held annual summits on digital media (Ria Novosti 2015). There is less institutionalized media collaboration between Russia and India beyond the framework of the BRICS, but some informal partnerships are taking hold. In April 2022, Russia's *Kommersant* reported that the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of the Republic of India had sent a letter to private outlets in India, asking them to reduce the degree of criticism about Russia's war in Ukraine (Indiiskie SMI Proidut Faik Kontrol' 2022).

Former Soviet countries make up the next strategic audience, largely interlinked with the outreach towards Russian "compatriots" discussed earlier. In recent years since Russia's involvement in the conflict in Syria, Russian authorities have started to emphasize Russia's influence in the Global South, including in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. In contrast to China, however, Russia's diplomatic outreach to the Global South has been more modest in scale, though some efforts, like *RT* programming in local languages, have been relatively successful.

Diasporic Audiences

As for targeting voices in the diaspora, the Chinese government has been carrying out a large-scale communication outreach to "overseas Chinese" (*huawai ren/huaqiao ren*) since the start of the reform era, much predating the emergence of the concept of soft power. Initially, outreach focused more on securing overseas investment; over time, it has shifted towards facilitating sympathies towards the CCP, as well as mitigating anti-CCP voices. Strategic communications has been strategically deployed for this purpose, including the expansion of Chinese state media broadcasting targeting specifically overseas Chinese (via CCTV-4) and the investment in and training of editors and journalists at Chinese diasporic media (China News Agency 2016). More recently, the CCP's outreach has focused on spreading pro-China content to diasporic communities via digital platforms (Menn 2021).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian government has also been actively targeting Russian-speaking diasporas officially referred to as "compatriots" (*sootchestvennik*)—the term that encompasses ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, as well as anyone with a cultural connection to Russia. Echoing the visions of the CCP,

the Kremlin's outreach to "compatriots" is driven by a mission to strengthen pro-Russia (and pro-Kremlin regime) sympathies. For Russia, however, diasporic outreach arguably presents a more critical mission for the regime's legitimacy, considering Putin's quest to recreate and protect the "Russian world" (*Russkiy mir*) and the positioning of Russia as a major power in Eurasia. The Russian regime's outreach to "compatriots" includes communications via international state media broadcasters (RT and *Sputnik* broadcasting in Russian, English and local languages) and domestic media outlets that are often accessible in neighboring regions. It also includes disinformation and "information flooding" via troll armies on sensitive issues and, in some cases, cyberattacks in retaliation for governments' treatment of Russian compatriots.⁵

Domestic Audiences

Finally, it is important to underscore that China and Russia's strategic communications efforts simultaneously target external and domestic audiences. China's interpretation of soft power positions it as a part of its national rejuvenation and its efforts to facilitate pride and a sense of national belonging amongst Chinese citizens (Repnikova 2022). Russia's treatment of soft power as a destabilizing Western influence translates into strategic communications that are in large part directed at resurrecting a sense of patriotism amongst Russian citizens. Both regimes see soft power and strategic communications as part of their routine efforts to bolster political legitimacy and regime resilience.

For China, the softer narratives about China's economic accomplishments (especially in comparison to the West), as well as the more antagonistic, explicitly anti-Western narratives communicated by some diplomats on Twitter, are also widely translated and diffused across domestic communication platforms. For Russia, the stories about its defense of conservatism, including traditional values, vis-à-vis the "immoral" West deliberately play into disappointments with the West among some Russian elites, as well as the trepidations about infusion of Western liberal values among some Russian citizens (Laurelle 2021).

⁵ The 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia after Estonia voted to remove Soviet-era statues is a good example of such counterattacks. During the current war with Ukraine, there have been allegations of Russia's cyberattacks against Ukrainian servers.

As with the distinctions in China and Russia's larger visions for image-crafting, when it comes to domestic audiences, China attempts to present an image of itself as an aspirational and confident great power, capable of contributing to the international system but also resisting the West. Russia, by contrast, appears to construct its image for domestic audiences in large part by "othering" the West as the harbinger of immoral values and behaviors and presenting Russia as the righteous (and the only) alternative.

Domestic persuasion is complemented by the censorship of external content, especially of Western media coverage. In both China and Russia, Western journalists have faced significant infringements on their freedom of reporting in recent years. In its 2021 report, the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China shared that foreign media professionals are experiencing "unprecedented hurdles" due to the Chinese government's efforts to impede independent reporting.⁶ The Russian government has heavily restricted access to Western media websites within Russia, and this past June, it passed a new law that enables the banning Western outlets in retaliation against Western bans of Russian state broadcasters.⁷ The two regimes, but especially the Chinese Communist Party, have also long restricted access to Western social media platforms, despite actively using them to promote their visions and narratives to external publics.

This section introduced the core target audiences of Chinese and Russian official strategic communications, including global publics, diasporic publics, and domestic audiences. This simultaneous targeting of three sets of audiences does present some potential vulnerabilities for the two regimes. First, the regimes must stretch their communications resources to accommodate diverse audiences across different cultural and linguistic contexts. Thus far, both China and Russia arguably have relatively stronger capabilities in targeting diasporic audiences than global, non-diasporic ones, especially when it comes to persuasion. Second, the targeting of global and domestic publics can result in tensions in messaging, whereby external narratives must consider domestic nationalistic leanings. China's assertive diplomatic communications, for instance, often

⁶ See: <https://www.voanews.com/a/foreign-media-face-unprecedented-hurdles-in-china-/6431553.html>

⁷ See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-duma-passes-law-retaliation-against-foreign-media-2022-06-30/>

alienate global audiences while galvanizing domestic publics. Finally, there are some potential frictions in the regimes' conceptions of global audiences. Whereas China and Russia both claim to speak to (and at times "for") the Global South, they prioritize communicating to (and against) the West. This also means that there is significant room for the US government to compete on narratives when it comes to vast audiences in the Global South.

Section III: Governance: Institutional Actors in Strategic Communications Efforts

The governance of strategic communications is more institutionalized in the case of China and more personalistic in the case of Russia, reflecting the core distinctions in the two countries' political systems. While both are authoritarian, with strong government oversight over external communication channels, this oversight is managed in China by several party and state institutions, while in Russia there is significant power relegated to individuals in Putin's inner circle.

The responsibility for guiding China's external communications is divided between the leading party organ, the Propaganda Department, and a leading state institution, the State Council. Specifically, the External Information Bureau, which sits directly under the Propaganda Department, and the State Council Information Office (SCIO) handle official communications directed at external audiences. Routine instructions to state media on what to write and how to cover certain stories come from the External Information Bureau, whereas press conferences with international media are handled by the SCIO (Wang 2022).

Occasionally, the two institutions send mixed signals to Chinese media. The Propaganda Department is more concerned with domestic stability and tends to be more restrictive of information flows, whereas the SCIO is more concerned with publicity and getting information out (Wang 2022). The leaders of state-owned media outlets must discern between these mixed signals and routinely revise their editorial decisions.

In addition to these two organs, the Foreign Ministry has played an increasingly active role in external communications in recent years, at times overpowering the Propaganda Department. Spokespeople for the Foreign Ministry are now actively communicating China's foreign policy agenda on social media platforms like Twitter, and the Foreign

Ministry has become more involved in managing the foreign bureaus of Chinese state media (a mission that was previously primarily under the Propaganda Department). Granting more power to the Foreign Ministry over the management of China's international media bureaus is part of a larger effort to foster more coordinated communication on core issues, like the coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative (Wang 2022).

Beyond the institutions in charge of media and communication, China's Ministry of Culture and Education manages cultural and education exchanges, while the Department of Finance and Administrative Affairs handles funding for elite training programs and exchanges. In some cases like Ethiopia (based on my fieldwork research), I found that MOFA officials within the embassy even process the interviews with potential trainees. In the sphere of culture and education, there has been in recent years an emergence of non-state or semi-state actors, such as the Chinese International Education Foundation, in charge of managing the Confucius Institutes since 2020. Individual Chinese universities are also actively engaged in promoting their programs, especially in the Global South, and recruiting international students.

The United Front Work Department, part of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, handles relationships and communications outreach with overseas Chinese nationals, as well as with ethnic minorities, religious organizations, and non-CCP party members within China. The scope of work and responsibilities of this Department have increased under Xi Jinping. This past July, Xi emphasized the importance of wider outreach to the Chinese diasporic population across religious and societal contexts, as part of the United Front mission (State Council of the PRC 2022). Xi's vision for United Front work was reflected in recent events, including the intimidation of pro-Hong Kong protesters in the UK (Quinn 2019), as well as the promotion of pro-China narratives and suppression of any anti-China agenda on Western university campuses (Saul, 2017). As part of the United Front work, Chinese Student and Scholars Associations on university campuses have also come under increasing Chinese government pressure, including co-optation through funding and employment opportunities, and coercion through threats of punishment for non-patriotic behavior while based overseas.⁸

⁸ See for instance: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/fifth-column-fears-the-chinese-influence-campaign-in-the-united-states/>.

In the case of Russia, governance over external communications is less institutionalized, and much of the influence is concentrated within Putin's inner circle. For example, Alexey Gromov, the first deputy of the Presidential Administration and a close ally of Putin, is known for personally guiding the operations of Russia's major international broadcasters, such as RT. A reputable Russian investigative media outlet, *Proekt*, has described Gromov, in its long-form investigation into his work, as the "master of puppets," referring to his coordination over Russian media outlets (The Proekt Team 2019). According to official sources interviewed for this report, Gromov personally convenes meetings with representatives of Russia's major news outlets and key government agencies, including the Foreign Ministry. In these meetings, Gromov gives directives on how important stories should be covered and coordinates strategic communications on sensitive issues, like the recent sanctions imposed on RT by the West (The Proekt Team 2019).

Sergey Kiriyyenko, the first deputy of the head of the Presidential Administration, is another influential figure in Russia's strategic communications. Though historically he was in charge of internal politics, including control over social media, most recently during the war in Ukraine, he was endowed with the role of constructing Russia's "new image" after the war, for both internal and external audiences (Pertsev 2022).

Maria Zakharova, the Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is one of Russia's most influential external communicators. She has personified Russian Foreign Ministry communication by delivering theatrical and often provocative briefings that attract millions of views on social media (Benyumov and Tamkin 2018). Zakharova has also set the tone for Foreign Ministry communication on social media, especially its reliance on satire as a way of fending off Western criticisms.

Russia's communications and cultural relations with "compatriots" are more institutionalized, though there is still significant power wielded by the leaders of these institutions. The Department of the Presidential Administration on Cross-Regional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, launched in 2005, oversees all former USSR countries and "independent" unrecognized republics, including South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria. A recent in-depth investigation by *Dossier*, a non-governmental investigative project launched and sponsored by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, uncovered that this Department has engaged in election interference

campaigns in neighboring countries, including Georgia. It further revealed that the top leadership of this department, including former director and vice-director, are former Russian intelligence officers (Dossier 2020a).

The Russkiy Mir Foundation, noted earlier, is a state-funded organization responsible for spreading Russian history, language, and culture. As of 2020, there were 119 “Russian centers” associated with this foundation, including 28 centers in Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, 53 centers in Europe, 26 in Asia, 7 in America, and 5 in Russia—many of them based at local universities, like with Chinese Confucius Institutes (Russkii Mir Annual Report 2020). The head of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Vyacheslav Nikonov, is a pro-Kremlin figure, a grandson of Molotov, and a Duma MP. He was personally appointed to the role at the foundation by Putin. Rossotrudnichestvo, federal-level agency responsible for supporting “compatriots” abroad and maintaining Russia’s influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), is headed by Evgenii Primakov, the grandson of the former Prime Minister, Evgenii Primakov. According to *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, as of 2021, there were 97 Rossotrudnichestvo offices in 80 countries, and 73 centers for Russian science and technology in 62 countries (Volkov 2021).

Russia’s offensive cyber operations, including cyberattacks and trolling aimed at both Western and CIS countries, are carried out by a mix of state security actors, including the FSB (the Federal Security Service), the GRU (the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation), the SVR (the Foreign Intelligence Service), as well as state-affiliated private actors, such as the Internet Research Agency—the troll factory in Saint Petersburg. All these agencies often co-opt private actors, known as “patriotic hackers,” as well as cyber criminals and human trolls to carry out hacking and trolling activities (Hakala and Melnychuk 2021). According to Western researchers, cyber activities by the Russian state are less hierarchical than in the Soviet era, and individual actors are granted significant agency to carry out the regime’s objectives (Hakala and Melnychuk 2021).

This section introduced the core institutions and individual actors charged with strategic communications in China and Russia. The key distinction in strategic communications governance between the two countries is the higher level of institutionalization in China versus the more personalistic communication management in Russia. This personalistic

style makes the tracking of and anticipating of strategic communications shifts in Russia more complicated and less predictable than in China.

Section IV: Operations: The Evolving Strategic Communications Toolkit

The capabilities of China and Russia's strategic communications toolkit include propaganda and counter-propaganda via their state-owned media outlets, as well as foreign ministry spokespeople, foreign outlets, and journalists; disinformation campaigns; and in the case of China, increasing dominance over global communication infrastructure markets. This strategic communications toolkit reflects the strategic communications objectives introduced in the first section, namely the combination of soft persuasion and assertive competition for narratives, including information warfare in the case of Russia.

Expanding Propaganda via State-Owned Media

Over the past two decades, Russian and Chinese global media outlets have gone through significant regional expansion, localization, and digitalization—the processes that have reinforced their reach across global contexts. As for regional expansion, China's main broadcaster, *CGTN*, has three major international bureau hubs in Washington, London, and Nairobi and broadcasts in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Russian. *Xinhua News Agency* has over 101 international bureaus globally, and the English-language official print publication *China Daily* is distributed (for free) across newsstands in the West, as well as hotel lobbies and official government buildings in the Global South.

Russia's main broadcaster, *RT*, until recently had regional bureaus in Washington, DC, and in major Western capitals, but they were shut down in 2022. It still has bureaus in Cairo and Bishkek. It broadcasts in English, Spanish, Arabic, German, and French. *Sputnik Radio and News Agency*—another major state-sponsored media outlet launched in 2014—has major bureaus in Moscow, Washington, and Berlin, amongst other cities, and its web broadcasting is available in 32 languages.

Both Chinese and Russian global media outlets have deliberately deployed localization in production and distribution as part of their outreach strategy. In the case of Chinese media, localization of production means hiring local journalists, primarily for reporting roles, while keeping editorial and managerial positions with Chinese staff. The journalists at Chinese state media foreign bureaus are largely made up of local talent, and in some cases like Africa, local journalists are granted resources and some (albeit limited) autonomy in carrying out independent reporting that would otherwise be limited in local outlets or even Western news outlets (Gagliardone 2013). Russian broadcasters, especially RT, have arguably embraced strategic production localization on a deeper level by not only hiring local journalists but also attracting well-known Western personalities to host their own shows on the program, including: the head of Wikileaks, Julian Assange; Scotland's former Prime Minister, Alex Sander; and former CNN host Larry King. In fact, Chinese scholars of external propaganda have widely written about RT's localization efforts, finding them inspirational for China's global media outlets (Feng and Liu 2020; Guo 2022).

Localization in content production is paralleled by that in content distribution. Chinese state media outlets like *China Daily* have set up content sharing agreements with at least thirty international newspapers to carry its paid insert, *China Watch* (Lim & Bergin 2018). In its digital format, *China Watch* blends with the content of the news outlet, potentially deceiving the readers to believe that it is an organic part of the publication (Cook 2020). Content distribution agreements are often signed as part of China's major regional forums, such as that between China and Latin America, when a high-level media partnership agreement was followed by a *China Daily* insert being placed into major Argentinian newspapers (Geall and Soutar 2018). Content distribution agreements are also prominent in China's state media outreach to diasporic audiences. According to an investigation by the *Financial Times*, "at least 200 nominally independent Chinese-language publications around the world" have been reprinting or broadcasting some content from China's official news outlets (Feng 2018). The largest number of content production agreements, including with international and Chinese language outlets, has been signed with the United States (over 35), followed by Thailand, Canada, and Indonesia.⁹

⁹ See:

[http://china-dashboard.aiddata.org/#/?aggregate_type=sum&data_type=annual&diplomacy_type=27&elite_visit_types=35%2C36%2C37%2C38&geographies=191%2C167%2C17%2C23%2C5%2C195%2C25%2C11%](http://china-dashboard.aiddata.org/#/?aggregate_type=sum&data_type=annual&diplomacy_type=27&elite_visit_types=35%2C36%2C37%2C38&geographies=191%2C167%2C17%2C23%2C5%2C195%2C25%2C11%2C12%2C13%2C14%2C15%2C16%2C18%2C19%2C20%2C21%2C22%2C24%2C26%2C27%2C28%2C29%2C30%2C31%2C32%2C33%2C34%2C35%2C36%2C37%2C38%2C39%2C40%2C41%2C42%2C43%2C44%2C45%2C46%2C47%2C48%2C49%2C50%2C51%2C52%2C53%2C54%2C55%2C56%2C57%2C58%2C59%2C60%2C61%2C62%2C63%2C64%2C65%2C66%2C67%2C68%2C69%2C70%2C71%2C72%2C73%2C74%2C75%2C76%2C77%2C78%2C79%2C80%2C81%2C82%2C83%2C84%2C85%2C86%2C87%2C88%2C89%2C90%2C91%2C92%2C93%2C94%2C95%2C96%2C97%2C98%2C99%2C100)

Major Russian media outlets with an international presence have also signed content distribution agreements to expand their reach. RT, for instance, broadcasts across Latin America and the Caribbean via agreements with local channels, as well as through cable providers (Gurganus 2018). As with China, some of these agreements appear to be struck following high-level official meetings. *Russia Beyond*, similarly to *China Daily*, is distributed as a paid insert (a monthly supplement) in major international newspapers. According to the former editor of *Russia Beyond*, as of 2013, it was carried by 28 newspapers across 22 countries and included influential media outlets like the Washington Post and the Daily Telegraph (Abov 2013).

Finally, Chinese and Russian international media outlets have expanded their reach via global digital platforms. Chinese outlets, as part of the official policy on “media convergence” directed at both domestic and global media outlets to sync traditional and digital media production (The State Council 2020), have significantly increased their followings on Western digital platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. According to an in-depth report by Freedom House, “as of December 2019, CGTN’s English account had 90 million followers—the largest of any media outlet on Facebook...” (Freedom House 2020). The report further found that four out of the five fastest growing media accounts on Facebook in terms of followers were Chinese state-owned outlets.

Russian major international broadcasters have also focused on digital platforms since 2017. As of March 2022, Simonyan claimed that RT’s YouTube had almost seven million subscribers. The sanctions on both *RT* and *Sputnik* have heavily influenced their social media reach in the West. RT, however, still has 11 million followers on the Chinese social media network Weibo and 17 million followers on the RT’s Spanish Facebook page, with especially large numbers of followers in Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela (Marques 2022). As with online followers of Chinese state media accounts, it is challenging to distinguish real engagement from fake and superficial engagement on these platforms.

The digital outreach of state-owned news outlets is complemented by an expansion of cyber diplomacy through Chinese and Russian diplomats. Between 2018 and 2022,

[2C14%2C68%2C13%2C63%2C157%2C61%2C22%2C2%2C144%2C83%2C58%2C41&geography_type=cou
ntry&max_year=2021&min_year=1999&per_capita_type=absolute&selected_view=bar&tech_assist_types=39
%2C40%2C41%2C42](#)

China launched 301 diplomatic twitter accounts (Huang 2022), in the West and also the Global South, including 57 accounts in Africa and in Latin America. China's Foreign Ministry spokespeople are also increasingly active on Twitter, regularly posting assertive and provocative messaging vis-à-vis the United States. There is an apparent interplay between state media and diplomatic messaging on social media platforms, whereby the two sets of actors frequently retweet one another. At the same time, there are also subtle distinctions, with state outlets like CGTN straddling a more balanced line in its digital communication and China's official spokespeople occasionally posting more subjective and dramatic commentaries. Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also started actively developing its cyber diplomacy, beginning in 2011. As noted earlier, Zakharova, the Director of the Information and Press Department of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has transformed Russia's cyber communications by both personifying it in her routine performative interactions with foreign actors and by changing the style of Foreign Ministry communication to include more humor, satire, and assertiveness.

Official funding for Chinese and Russian global state media outlets (and cyber diplomacy at large) is difficult to estimate. As noted earlier, in 2009, the Chinese government invested \$6 billion in global communications. Some analysts like Shambaugh have estimated that China is spending \$10 billion a year on soft power, but these numbers require further verification. RT has an annual budget of over \$300 million, according to a recent report published by the Rand Corporation (Paul and Matthews 2016). These numbers have slightly increased in 2022, when the project of the Federal Budget of the Russian Federation distributed about \$350 million to RT (Gosfinansirovani RT i MIA Rossija Segodnya...2021).

Localization and digitalization in external propaganda have thus far served to amplify the voices and visions of the Chinese and Russian governments internationally. At the same time, these techniques can potentially backfire, especially when it comes to digitalization. Unlike their management of domestic digital platforms, Chinese and Russian governments have limited capability to censor Western digital platforms, including critical reactions of audiences. On Twitter, for instance, China's assertive public diplomacy is often met with reprimand and satire rather than with whole-hearted acceptance. The openness of Western internet platforms and the media environment at large, therefore, can both empower Russia and Chinese propaganda and curtail its influence, by presenting a channel for public pushback and critique.

Propaganda via Foreign Outlets and Journalists

Another important, more subversive tool in the strategic communications arsenals of China and Russia is the delegation of propaganda to foreign outlets and journalists. The discussion of state-owned outlets already noted the practice of placing paid media inserts into international media and hiring local journalists. In addition to these practices, the Chinese and Russian governments (and media outlets affiliated with those governments) have purchased and financially supported foreign media, as well as carried out intensive relationship-building programs with foreign journalists.

As for investment in foreign media, the Chinese government has expanded its propaganda strategy from “borrowing foreign boats” to “buying the boat” (Brady 2015). In South Africa, Chinese state media bought a 20 percent share in Independent Media, the nation’s largest media group (Lim and Bergin 2018). In Mexico, China’s *Phoenix TV* purchased a radio station near the US border (Cook 2020). In Hungary, China’s nationalistic *Global Times* outlet purchased stakes in radio stations (Cook 2020). China’s state-run China Radio International (CRI) has purchased controlling shares in at least 33 radio stations around the world, including WCRW in Washington, DC (Paul 2022). The Russian government has selectively sponsored some foreign outlets, though the exact nature of the financial deals is unclear. A report by the European Institute for Security Studies, for instance, notes that Russia sponsors Serbian nationalist outlets but doesn’t specify the details of these arrangements. Russian state media, however, can broadcast directly into many neighboring countries, making it easier to infiltrate the information space.

Cultivating favorable foreign voices is also done through journalist capacity-building programs. The Chinese government has launched extensive journalist training programs in the past two decades. The China-Africa Press Center fellowship, for instance, was implemented in 2014 and brings on average one thousand African journalists each year to China for a ten-month training, including internships in Chinese state media outlets, lectures about China’s accomplishments, and tours of Chinese infrastructure and cultural sights. This program has recently expanded to include journalists from Southeast Asian countries. There are no formal expectations for journalists participating in this program, but they are encouraged to write articles in their domestic news outlets about their experiences in China. From my interviews with Ethiopian participants, I found that they

tend to produce positive stories about their trips and about China more broadly. In addition to these institutionalized training, the Chinese government has convened large-scale forums with foreign journalists as part of promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (Cook 2020). In Russia, the journalist training programs are run by the state-owned broadcasters themselves, including by RT and Sputnik. Their projects appear to focus on attracting journalists from “near abroad,” but this year, RT announced that it has also conducted an educational seminar for journalists from Nicaragua (Telegram Simonyan 2020). There is little systematic information available on how extensive these training sessions are in the Russian context. Overall, China has more aggressively pursued both the delegation of propaganda via investment in foreign outlets and the building of positive relationships with international journalists to shape their future coverage of China.

Coercive Strategies: Cyber Disinformation

When it comes to more coercive strategies, Russia has thus far embraced them on a larger scale and with higher sophistication than China. Research on *RT's* America programming found that its flagship shows regularly deployed conspiratorial framing in their coverage (Yablokov 2015). The conspiracies presented primarily concerned the actions of the US government, with the main objective being to escalate existing public mistrust towards US government institutions (Yablokov 2015).

Studies of Russian disinformation campaigns online, especially those carried out by Russia's Internet Research Agency, further uncover expansive and sophisticated disinformation capabilities. Analyses of Russia's meddling in the 2016 US Presidential Election, for instance, revealed the deployment of a dual strategy: identifying and sorting voters into different groups through organic posts and then targeting voters with political ads that match their own interests (Timberg 2017). Studies of Russia's disinformation campaigns against European audiences have found that IRA accounts have built a large following by buying followers, using “follower fishing” (following new accounts for them to reciprocate with a follow), and employing narrative switching, whereby initially mundane discussion topics turn more political over time (Dawson and Innes 2019). A recent study of IRA accounts' disinformation on vaccines in the United States found that their tweets “evoked political identities” and that “this could exacerbate recently emerging partisan gaps relating to vaccine misinformation (Walter

et al. 2020). Adapting communications strategies to specific audiences and tapping into the existing identities are a central tenets of Russia's disinformation campaigns.

Starting in mid-2017, the Chinese government selectively embraced some Russian-style disinformation tactics, but they are largely targeted at Chinese diasporas thus far. In 2018, for instance, the Chinese government orchestrated disinformation campaigns aimed at boosting a pro-Beijing candidate in a mayoral race in Taiwan, and in 2019, Twitter took down 900 accounts associated with the Chinese government that were propagating disinformation about Hong Kong protesters (Cook 2020). Following the pandemic and the intensified competition for narratives between China and the United States, China's Foreign Ministry spokespeople have also engaged in disinformation about the origins of the virus, and thousands of suspicious pro-China Twitter accounts have emerged that bolstered the pro-CCP position (Zhong et. al. 2021). China's disinformation campaigns are not yet as extensive as Russia's and are less capable of penetrating, mimicking, and exacerbating societal sentiments and divisions. China is learning fast, however, and its evolving capabilities in disinformation should be watched closely. A recent study by the Oxford Internet Institute, for instance, uncovered the deployment of a "coordinated amplification network" by Chinese diplomats in the United Kingdom, whereby 62 inauthentic accounts were created on Twitter to promote the postings of the Chinese ambassador and the Chinese embassy in the UK.¹⁰

Expansion in Global Communications Infrastructure

Finally, it is important to highlight China's expanding communications infrastructure capabilities. As part of its global economic push, China has been selling and developing communications infrastructure on a large scale, especially in the Global South. By June 2021, for instance, the Shenzhen-based manufacturer Transsion dominated the smartphone market in Africa (Olander 2021). StarTimes, a privately owned Chinese company with close ties to the CCP, dominates the digital television infrastructure on the continent (Cooks 2020). China's mega-app WeChat is widely adopted across Asia (Cook 2020). As part of China's Digital Silk Road initiative, Chinese companies are also

¹⁰ See: <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news-events/news/new-study-finds-coordinated-amplification-network-promoting-tweets-by-chinas-diplomats-in-the-uk/>

expanding the provision of other digital infrastructure—including 5G networks, surveillance, and smart city technology—across BRI countries.

This expansion in digital infrastructure provision empowers China’s strategic communications capabilities on multiple levels. First, some of this infrastructure carries softer, ideational components. StarTimes’ digital television packages, for instance, include Chinese media and entertainment alongside Western and local content. Second, the provision of digital infrastructure in the Global South directly feeds into China’s projected image as a “responsible major power,” sharing its technological prowess with other developing countries. Finally, expanding its digital footprint allows China to set standards in digital infrastructure, challenging the dominance of the United States.

This section introduced the evolving strategic communications toolkit deployed by China and Russia, ranging from increasingly localized and digitized propaganda via state media and the delegation of propaganda messaging to foreign journalists and local news outlets, to engagement in cyber disinformation strategies and the expansion of global communication infrastructure. Whereas Russia is more sophisticated in its deployment of coercive disinformation techniques, China has been more proactive in expanding its digital infrastructure footprint, such that it can present significant challenges to the US government in the long run.

Section V: Alliances and Convergences

As already noted in the section on strategic objectives, both China and Russia aspire to rebalance the world order to diminish the influence of the West (and especially of the United States). Both political regimes perceive the West as deliberately antagonizing their legitimacy externally and domestically. Both regimes attribute significant power to Western media and cultural communication channels in shaping public perceptions of global publics, including within China and Russia. The strategic communications goals of China and Russia, therefore, align in competing with and pushing back on Western narratives, Western media, and cultural influence more broadly. At the same time, there is an important distinction in how the two regimes engage in this competition. China promotes itself as an aspirational alternative to the West and defends itself against perceived Western accusations. Russia, on the other hand, does not attempt to sell a

distinctly Russian model or vision but rather seeks to uphold and elevate its prominence by weakening the West. This distinction can be categorized as “constructive” versus “destructive” approaches. China attempts to construct a positive image of itself, whereas Russia concentrates its goal primarily on destructing the Western-centric order. At the same time, considering China’s more assertive diplomatic posture in recent years, its constructive stance is often counter-balanced, and arguably deluded with, its increasingly antagonistic rhetoric, especially as expressed by China’s official spokespeople.

At the operational level, the strategic communications of China and Russia occasionally reinforce each other but for the most part generally operate in isolation. When it comes to mutual reinforcement, propaganda messaging aimed at illuminating the real and manufactured weaknesses in, as well as at spreading conspiracies about, Western governance is increasingly overlapping between the two countries. The messaging about Russia’s war in Ukraine is an apt illustration of this overlap, whereby both China and Russia have framed the West and NATO as the culprits behind the escalation of this conflict and have pushed back on US critiques of Russia’s actions by questioning the US’s moral legitimacy. In my analysis of China’s official and social media narratives on the war in Ukraine, I find that much of the seemingly pro-Russian discourse is rooted in deep anti-Western sentiments (Repnikova 2022). During this conflict, Chinese official spokespeople have also spread Russian conspiracy theories, including those about US biological weapons stored in Ukraine (Repnikova 2022). Beyond the context of the Russia-Ukraine War, China has recently embraced more conspiratorial, Russian-style rhetoric vis-à-vis the United States and more disinformation strategies, including false narratives about the origins of Covid-19. Some convergence in communication tactics is also aimed at mutual domestic audiences. As part of their strengthening bilateral relationship, Chinese state media practitioners tend to stick to positive coverage of Russia, and Russian media largely presents China in a positive way, based on my analysis and observations.

While the areas of convergence in Chinese and Russian communication tactics should be closely observed, it is also important not to overstate the extent of convergence. Thus far, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that China and Russia bolster each other’s propaganda agendas on the international stage, beyond that of occasionally diffusing similar negative narratives about the West. For example, Russian state media

does not appear to endorse China's policies towards Taiwan or its public diplomacy efforts in the Global South; for their part, Chinese state media communicates ambivalent commentaries on Ukraine and does not diffuse Russia's critiques of the West as corrupting traditional and spiritual values. For the most part, the communication efforts of China and Russia on the global stage proceed in parallel or in isolation to one another.

This section emphasized the increasing convergence in strategic communications by China and Russia when it comes to rebuking Western narratives. At the same time, there are also important areas of divergence. First, China still aspires to "telling its story" and promoting its image, whereas Russia mainly focuses on the destructive elements of strategic communications vis-à-vis the West. Second, when it comes to major international crises faced by the two nations, such as Russia's war in Ukraine, there are limited expressions of discursive support for one another, as evident in China's ambivalent public stance about the war.

Section VI: Environment: Public Support for Russia's Strategic Communications

Estimating political and popular support for Chinese and Russian strategic communications domestically is challenging, considering the opacity of the two regimes. Some of the external communications carried out by state media and diplomats are not accessible to domestic publics. At the same time, there are some indicators of popular support for official policies and practices or, at the very least, some convergence in public and official aspirations.

In the case of China, two recent public opinion surveys indicate that Chinese citizens consider China's global image to be increasingly positive. The 2021 Carter Center survey found that the majority of respondents believe that China is viewed either very favorably or favorably by the international community (U.S.-China Perception Monitor 2021). The 2020 Global Times survey revealed that 78 percent of respondents believe China's image has improved in recent years, and that 70 percent of respondents support "wolf warrior diplomacy" tactics (Wang Qi 2020). These findings indicate that domestically, there is an appreciation for China's strategic communications efforts,

especially the more assertive communication style embraced by Chinese diplomats on Twitter.

In the case of Russia, there are no recent polls specifically targeting public perceptions of Russia's image. A recent poll about public expectations of Russia's position in international politics, however, indicates that 47 percent of respondents anticipated an improvement and 31 percent expected Russia's stance to remain unchanged (VTSIOM 2022). Recent public opinion polls about trust in political institutions, including trust in Vladimir Putin, further showcase persisting public support despite the ongoing events in Ukraine (Levada 2022). Given that the majority of Russians still get their news from state-controlled television, these attitudes are unlikely to change in the short-term future, and we are likely to see at least implicit public support for Russia's strategic communications practices.

Overall, the domestic public opinion environment is largely positive when it comes to official strategic communications by both Chinese and Russian governments.

Section VII: Results: Varied Reception Across Strategic Audiences

Considering the broad nature of Chinese and Russian strategic communications objectives discussed in section one, it is challenging to definitively state whether they appear to have fulfilled these objectives. In both cases, there are no transparent criteria for success that can be used to evaluate results over time. I discuss the varied responses of the target audiences below.

Starting with diasporic audiences, there is no reliable survey data that captures the variation in public sentiment towards the Chinese and Russian regimes. Recent studies on China's influence operations towards diasporic groups indicate the CCP is increasingly effective at mobilizing diaspora communities via the WeChat app, especially during crisis moments like the Covid-19 pandemic (Ceccagno and Thuno 2022). It also appears to be relatively successful at shaping the narratives of Chinese diasporic media outlets in favor of the CCP (Sun and Sinclair 2016).

Russia's diasporic outreach has yielded mixed results. On the one hand, about one million compatriots have relocated to Russia since the launch of the "near abroad" program (Laurelle 2021). At the same time, Russia's diasporic outreach has not necessarily succeeded in creating strong affective bonds with Russia. Many Russian diaspora communities, such as those in the Baltic states, maintain a connection to Russian language and culture but do not consider Russia to be their homeland (Coolican 2021). The Russian government also often *speaks for* rather than *with* the diaspora, as evident in the current crisis in Ukraine.

As for external responses to Chinese and Russian strategic communications, the results are mixed in both cases. China's strategic communications towards major industrialized democracies has not yielded a more positive image of itself. The latest public opinion surveys on China's favorability across 19 nations, most of them liberal democracies, find that "negative views of China remain at or near historic highs" (Silver, Huang, and Clancy 2022). In the Asia-Pacific region, China's favorability has also declined, as more Asian countries are favoring the United States (Saransomrurtai and Reinhart 2022).

In the Global South, especially Africa but also parts of Latin America, China's outreach appears to have been more successful. The 2021 Afrobarometer surveys reveal that Africans tend to hold generally positive views about Chinese influence (Sheehy and Asunka 2021). A 2021 Pew Survey in Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina found that nearly half of the respondents held favorable views of China (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2021). These successes, however, might be explained more by China's economic influence in these regions as opposed to its effective strategic communications outreach. Studies on perceptions of Chinese media amongst African journalists and elites, for instance, found that they rarely access Chinese media sources (Wasserman 2012). In Latin America, scholars find that China's Spanish-language television channel also faces limited recognition and credibility (Morales 2018).

Russia's image has long been unfavorable in major Western democracies. According to a 2020 Pew Research survey, views of Russia remained negative across 14 industrialized democracies included in the survey (Huang 2020). In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia's ratings have further dropped, including in countries that prior to the war held moderately favorable views towards Russia, such as South Korea (Wike et al. 2022). In Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, views of Russia are

mixed. In Central Asia, for instance, a 2020 survey of young people found that many looked at Russia favorably, as both an ally and as an education destination (Kabarchuk & Poplavskaya 2019). Yet, in the Baltics, especially following the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the majority of citizens see Russia as a major threat (Clem and Herron 2022).

Though surveys on perceptions of Russia in the Global South are limited, some studies indicate a relatively higher approval for Russia in Africa (median approval of 41 percent), but approval has been declining over the past decade (Bikus 2022).

Considering that Russia's underlying aim is to disrupt the Western image rather than to promote Russia's global vision, we should be cautious in interpreting these ratings as a failure for Russia's strategic communication. Russia's anti-Western rhetoric, for instance, has resonated in many parts of the Global South, as illustrated in the context of the war in Ukraine and the unwillingness of many nations to condemn Russia's actions, instead attributing responsibility to the West (Tucker 2022). Beyond the current conflict, there is ample evidence that Russia's disinformation campaigns, such as those carried out during the 2016 election, were influential in shaping perceptions of political issues as well as voting behaviors (Jamieson 2018).

Overall, it is challenging to definitively determine the success of Chinese and Russian strategic communications. Their initiatives appear to have relatively more impact with diasporic audiences and with target publics in the Global South. At the same time, when it comes to the disruptive capabilities of strategic communications, Russia has been relatively successful in its disinformation campaigns in the West.

Section VIII: Conclusions and Implications for US Strategic Interests

This paper presented an in-depth comparative analysis of Chinese and Russian official strategic communications visions and practices. The analysis underscored some important similarities and distinctions in how the two regimes envision and implement strategic communications. Starting with similarities in visions, both regimes are heavily motivated by maintaining and strengthening their domestic legitimacy through effective strategic communications. This means that external communication is always rooted in the core objective of appealing to domestic audiences. As part of the increasingly

nationalistic stance of the two regimes (including their domestic publics), the Chinese and Russian governments tend to construct their communication agenda in response to the West (and especially the United States), which they see as a major threat to their strategic interests externally and domestically. Both countries frequently rely on assertive communications that target the United States; yet, though Russia has built its entire strategy around this, for China, it is only part of its communication vision and arsenal. Anti-Western communication is aimed as much at directly competing with the West as it is at defending domestic audiences from potentially harmful Western narratives about China and Russia.

In terms of tactical similarities, both China and Russia increasingly engage in strategic communications that take advantage of local media professionals, distribution networks, and news outlets, as well as Western digital platforms. These more indirect and subtle forms of persuasion are important to track, as they are likely to expand and intensify in the future. What may present a threat to the US long-term strategic interests is less the *type* of message communicated and more how it is communicated and delivered .

At the same time, some important distinctions exist in how China and Russia communicate. First, in terms of strategic vision, Russia is more focused on disruption of the status quo, whereas China still aspires to gain legitimacy and recognition by global publics, despite embracing more assertive narratives and communications techniques in recent years. Second, in terms of tactical differences, Russia has been more invested in cyber disinformation strategies and toolkits, whereas China has invested heavily in more tools for co-opting actors, such as training media professionals and expanding digital communications infrastructure in the Global South.

The analysis of Chinese and Russian strategic communications in this paper presents some potential lessons for US public diplomacy, especially when it comes to competing with China and Russia.

First, the United States has an opportunity to compete for Chinese and Russian diasporic publics in the US and globally by investing more heavily in outreach to local media outlets and community organizers. Part of the reliance on Chinese official funding by Chinese language diasporic outlets, for instance, is rooted in their limited resources rather than in strong affinities for the Chinese Communist Party. Support for diasporic media and their integration into the mainstream media environment in the United

States could help dissuade them from close engagements with China. Outreach to diasporic communities can also be expanded to other regions strategic to both China and Russia, such as Southeast Asia in the case of China and Eastern (and Central) Europe in the case of Russia. This can be carried out through educational and media training forums led by American NGOs, amongst other outreach tactics.

Second, the US should take advantage of the mixed reception towards China and Russia in the Global South by investing more in public diplomacy there, including in journalist training, foreign correspondents, and cyber diplomacy. One area of particularly vital need is investment in civil society and journalism training in Global South countries that would better equip local leaders and community groups to manage China's increasing presence. In my research in Ethiopia, I found that the grasp of Chinese political and economic influence amongst local media and civil society professionals was quite limited and more educational training could strengthen their negotiation abilities vis-à-vis China.

Third, the US (and particularly US companies) should be more deliberate about competing for communications infrastructure contracts in the Global South. While Chinese companies tend to win most of the contracts, American companies have been competitive in some contexts. For instance, in 2021, a U.S.-backed consortium won a multibillion-dollar contract over a Chinese company to build Ethiopia's 5G-network.¹¹

Fourth, while it might be tempting to treat China and Russia as an "information nexus," US policymakers should pay close attention to the distinctions in their visions and strategies. For instance, rather than solely underscoring China's rhetorical support for Russia in the war in Ukraine, it would be strategically beneficial to also highlight China's ambivalent rhetoric about the war, including its lack of direct endorsement of the conflict. Publicly demonstrating and acknowledging divisions between China and Russia helps raise questions about the extent of their alliance and exposes their distinct geopolitical agendas. Considering that China is still more invested in promoting a positive image of itself than Russia, the US government could also play into China's obsession with soft power by encouraging the Chinese government to live up to its global governance ambitions, including by improving its environmental standards as

¹¹ See: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-china-tech-fight-opens-new-front-in-ethiopia-11621695273>

part of the Belt and Road initiative and by increasing the transparency of its global infrastructure projects.

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