The Russia and China Disinformation Nexus

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Abstract

The increasing use of information warfare by authoritarian states to promote a multipolar order, coupled with a growing rapprochement between Russia and China, can lead to synergies that undermine international security. In response to the problem, this thesis aims to unpack and examine the Russia-China disinformation nexus to address the implications of the relationship on international security. To do so, the thesis employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze Russian and Chinese disinformation on Twitter following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, using the concepts of sharp power and policy transfer as a framework of analysis.

The results indicate that while joint aims to undermine US hegemony provides fertile grounds for synergetic effects, the aims and objective of each state is the driving factor behind overlapping disinformation. The primary process of convergence was China emulating some features of Russian disinformation, with some evidence suggesting that Russia and China engage in a reciprocal policy transfer of information warfare. The findings further indicate that China formats its disinformation to appear neutral in the Ukraine war, despite the declared no-limit partnership with Russia. These findings offer insights into the complex evolving ‘no-limit’ partnership developing between Russia and China and are thus significant for policymakers to counter these states’ influence efforts.

*Key words:* Information Warfare, China, Russia, Mixed-Methods, Security

Words: 13,968
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1. Introduction

In recent years, information warfare has emerged as a significant feature of international relations due to its prevalence and impact on global politics. The transition of the international system from a unipolar to a multipolar order has witnessed authoritarian states like Russia and China increasingly resort to information warfare to challenge the hegemony of the United States (Sahakyan, 2022; Cafruny et al., 2023). While some scholars assert that these tactics have successfully accomplished Russia’s strategic goals (Richey, 2018; Kragh et al., 2020; Yablokov, 2015), others argue that the impact is overestimated (Lanoszka, 2019; Colom-Piella, 2022). Nonetheless, Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated the substantial impact of influence operations in shaping political outcomes and shifting the balance of power (Jaitner & Geers, 2015; Erlich & Garner, 2023). Similarly, China’s rise as a global power and its attempts to challenge the existing international order, coupled with its extensive efforts to expand its information influence, have made Chinese influence operations a main contemporary security issue for international stability (Balcaen et al., 2021).

As a growing rapprochement between Russia and China is developing aimed at accelerating a multipolar order (Garcia & Modlin, 2022), little research has examined the implications of the relationship in the information domain. I argue that the central problem is that if Chinese and Russian information warfare practices converge, they can create synergetic effects that amplify the threat to international security. So far, existing research has yet to address this issue fully and thus offered limited support for policy development to counter these influence operations effectively.

In response to the problem, this thesis aims to unpack and examine the Russia-China disinformation nexus to address the implications of possible synergy effects the Sino-Russo relationship can impose on international security. To do so, the thesis utilize a mixed-method approach to examine the interplay of Russian and Chinese influence operations in the context of the Ukraine war. Accordingly, the thesis has two objectives: first, the thesis seeks to characterize the tactics and content of Chinese and Russian influence operations in the
Ukraine war, and second, to explore how and if these influence operations converge and create synergetic effects that undermine the stability of the international system. To gain insight into the implications of the Russian and Chinese information warfare nexus on international security, I pose the following question:

*In what ways do the information warfare efforts of Russia and China converge in the context of the Ukrainian war, and what are the implications of these dynamics for international security?*

To address the research question, this thesis employs a mixed-method approach to a case study that examines the nature and interplay of Russian and Chinese influence operations in the Ukraine war. Utilizing theoretical assumptions from the concepts of *sharp power* and *policy transfer* as a framework for analysis, a qualitative and quantitative content analysis is performed on data generated from the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) database and the EUvsDisinfo database. To that end, the study focuses predominantly on the disinformation disseminated on Twitter during the initial year of the full-scale conflict (February 24th, 2022 - February 24th, 2023) to capture possible influx points where messaging and tactics converge to generate synergistic effects.

Furthermore, this thesis contributes to the ongoing discussion in structural realism concerning the impact of information warfare on the distribution of power in the international system. Thus, following a realist approach, the thesis contributes to research on information warfare by analyzing the components and interplay of Russian and Chinese influence operations. More specifically, it provides new findings regarding how authoritarian states use information warfare to reshape the distribution of power, thus advancing theories on major powers’ role in international relations. Furthermore, by providing a new case study that compares Russian and Chinese influence operations in the context of the Ukraine war, the thesis contributes to the inductive development of research on structural realism by examining the impact of information warfare on the balance of power and the stability of the international system.

The thesis proceeds as follows: Chapter Two accounts for existing research on information warfare, while Chapter Three offers a theoretical and analytical framework.
Chapter Four outlines the methodology employed in the research, followed by Chapter Five, in which Chinese and Russian disinformation on Twitter is analyzed. The thesis concludes in Chapter Six by discussing the findings and implications for international security.
2. Literature Review: Information Warfare and International Relations

Information warfare has emerged as an essential foreign policy tool in the 21st century, with governments and other actors using various forms of digital disinformation to achieve strategic goals. This phenomenon has attracted growing attention from scholars in International Relations who seek to understand the drivers, dynamics, and impact on global politics.

This literature review seeks to explore and synthesize the existing research on information warfare by presenting a thematic overview of research that concerns China and Russia’s use of the practice. To achieve this goal, the literature review will first provide a brief overview of information warfare in contemporary international relations and how it is used as a foreign policy tool. The review will then examine the literature on the tactics and strategies used by Russia and China, followed by China’s involvement in the Ukraine crisis focusing on the Sino-Russia relationship and the implications for global security and the international system. By systematically examining the existing scholarship, this review aims to identify the key debates, findings, and knowledge gaps to provide insights into the broader significance of information warfare in contemporary international relations.

2.1. Information Warfare in Contemporary International Politics: a Multipolar World

The use of propaganda in conflicts is a well-documented historical phenomenon (See Lasswell, 1927). In particular, Russia has a rich history of utilizing disinformation as a state-sponsored tactic (Freelon & Wells, 2020). In the context of military strategy, the use of information as a tool for broader strategic goals can be traced back to the Cold War-era praxis
of active measures (Rid, 2020). The contemporary conceptualization of Russian strategy involves hybrid warfare, which combines non-traditional military tactics, political and conventional warfare methods, and influence operations (Renz, 2016). Thus, as Jaitner & Geers (2015) has observed, information warfare and influence operations are integral to the Russian hybrid warfare strategy.

Moreover, while the strategies mentioned above are often associated with Russian behavior, the shifting dynamics of the international system from US unipolarity to multiple power centers has seen rising powers like China increasingly adopting and emulating Russian tactics. The adoption of the tactics and strategies can be theoretically explained by conceptualizing the behavior as a policy transfer (Blatter et al., 2022; Simmons et al., 2006). Furthermore, this trend has also given rise to theoretical frameworks such as sharp power which seeks to explain the malicious use of information to advance state power (Walker, 2018).

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a pivotal moment in the transformation towards multipolarity, exposing Russia’s revisionist ambitions (Sahakyan, 2022; Cafruny et al., 2023). Since the onset of modern Russian aggression in 2014, the concept of information warfare has gained renewed and increased attention from scholars. In contrast to hybrid warfare, which combines conventional warfare with influence operations, information warfare is defined as “the use of data, information, and knowledge, and their associated technologies to manipulate information and the physical environment for the benefit of an attacker and against an opponent” (Hutchinson, 2021: 18). However, the term is often used interchangeably with other related concepts such as disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, active measures, and cyber warfare which can lead to confusion as the abundance of terminology lacking clear definitions.

To address this problem, Arceneaux (2021) offers a typology of government communication that provides a useful framework for understanding the various forms of state-sponsored strategic communication. The typology categorizes government communication into four distinct types: public diplomacy, public affairs, psychological operations, and propaganda. Within this framework, psychological operations and propaganda are conceptualized as overarching categories of information operations, which are further
divided into subcategories such as digital diplomacy, state-sponsored disinformation, and computational propaganda (Arceneaux, 2021: 7).

While various definitions of the term information warfare have been suggested, this thesis conceptualizes information warfare as a state-sponsored strategic communication aimed at an adversary with the intention of manipulating the information environment to gain an advantage. This definition thus encompasses similar concepts, such as influence operations and state-sponsored disinformation. Consequently, this thesis regards information warfare as the broad strategy employed by states to achieve military, political, or economic objectives. Influence operations, on the other hand, is a subset tactic of information warfare that aims to influence the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of target audiences through the use of disinformation. In this sense, disinformation refers to the intentional misrepresentation of information used to further political objectives. A central aspect of this project explores the use of information warfare as a foreign policy tool, specifically by Russia and China. With the rise of sharp power (Walker, 2018) and increasing use of non-kinetic tactics in interstate conflict (Thornton, 2015), information warfare poses a significant challenge to international relations and the stability of the international system.

2.1.1. Information Warfare as Foreign Policy: The Enduring Legacy of Russian Disinformation

In recent years, scholars in the field of International Relations have investigated the use of information warfare and influence operations by Russia as a foreign policy tool to achieve strategic objectives (Thorton, 2015; Sohl, 2022). For example, Thorton (2015) implies that Russia utilizes disinformation as a tool of statecraft to pursue its geopolitical interests, particularly concerning the EU and NATO. In his article, Thorton highlights the need for a new defense approach that considers the evolving nature of warfare in the 21st century, including information warfare. He recommends that Western states focus on developing their capacity to conduct and counter information operations to deter potential adversaries and reduce the impact of disinformation campaigns.

Similarly, Sohl (2022) highlights the central role of disinformation in Russia’s grand strategy to undermine Western democracies and expand its sphere of influence. A notable
finding in Sohl’s work is that Moscow perceives the West’s promotion of democratic values and color revolutions as a direct threat to authoritarian regimes. In response, Kremlin has developed a strategy as a countertactic to this approach, using disinformation to promote illiberal values such as racism, homophobia, and misogyny as a means of undermining and potentially toppling democratic systems (Sohl, 2022: 97). This emphasizes the importance of countering disinformation and protecting the integrity of democratic institutions, which are essential for maintaining peace and stability in the international system. Like Thorton (2015), Sohl (2022) maintains that Western states must develop their capacity to conduct and counter influence operations to deter potential adversaries and reduce influence operations’ impact.

To address the threat of information warfare, studies have provided policy recommendations, such as a comprehensive approach to counter disinformation proposed by Samadashvili (2015) and an analytical framework for European states to respond to Russian information warfare offered by Hellman & Wagnsson (2017), which highlight the importance of legislative measures, civil society initiatives, international cooperation, and analyzing different counter-strategies for democratic norms protection.

Together these studies offer valuable insights into the growing prominence of information warfare in the international system. Major powers, such as Russia and China, have made it a central component of their statecraft, using it as a tactic to achieve geopolitical objectives. However, these studies have not fully addressed the new forms of competition and cooperation enabled by the transition toward a multipolar system. This highlights the need for further research in this area.

2.1.2. Russian Tactics and Strategies: Flooding the Information Space

To date, a substantial part of research into information warfare has sought to explore the tactics and strategies employed by Russia. For example, Richey (2018) argues that the key strategy in Russian information warfare is to contaminate political discourse and erode confidence in fundamental concepts such as truth and objective political facts.

Another tactic of Russian information warfare is the use of conspiracy theories. Kragh et al. (2020) argue that conspiracy theories serve as a way to justify Russian foreign policy and
the repression of domestic groups, while Yablokov (2015) asserts that they are used to legitimize Russian policies and undermine US policies. According to Yablokov (2015), disseminating conspiracy theories through the state-sponsored media outlet Russia Today (RT) serves as a public diplomacy tool to attract a global audience with diverse political views. Overall, flooding the information space with disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories is a central strategy in Russian information warfare. However, the effectiveness of this practice remains a matter of debate. For instance, while some scholars argue that disinformation can significantly impact an adversary’s foreign policy or military deployment (e.g., Richey, 2018; Kragh et al., 2020), Lanoszka (2019) suggests that the strategic effects of disinformation are often exaggerated, especially in terms of changing the policies of an adversary’s foreign policy or military deployment.

The use of troll farms is another tactic in Russian information warfare. These are groups of individuals who are paid to spread disinformation and propaganda online. The Internet Research Agency (IRA) is a well-known example of a Russian troll farm that operated during the 2016 US presidential election, as documented by DiResta et al. (2019) and Bastos & Farkas (2019). The IRA used social media platforms to spread false information, amplify divisive political messages, and stoke existing political tensions in the US. This tactic is also used in other countries. According to (Doroshenko & Lukito, 2021), Russia first developed and deployed these strategies at the beginning of the Ukraine conflict, particularly in the Donbass region.

In the context of Russian information warfare in Ukraine, several studies have evaluated the practice and effectiveness on a strategic level (Jaitner & Geers, 2015; Colom-Piella, 2022; Erlich & Garner, 2023). For example, Erlich & Garner 2023 investigate the effectiveness of pro-Kremlin propaganda aimed at Ukraine citizens, arguing that, for the most part, the disinformation is ineffective unless aimed at Ukrainians with partisan or ethnic ties to Russia. Conversely, Jaitner & Geers (2015) has examined the implications of information warfare on an international level, arguing that the practice has been highly successful and that the Western powers are falling behind in this domain of warfare. Unlike Jaitner & Geers (2015), Colom-Piella (2022) agrees with Erlich & Garner (2023) and is skeptical of the effectiveness of information warfare in Ukraine, arguing that while it may have some impact, it is not the sole cause of events in the country. He highlights the importance of understanding the broader
context and factors contributing to the conflict in Ukraine, such as historical tensions and geopolitical interests.

These studies highlight the dynamic and diffuse nature of information warfare and the difficulties in measuring the impact and implications of the practice. Nonetheless, by elucidating the tactics and strategies deployed, research has provided different perspectives on its effectiveness domestically and internationally.

2.1.3. Chinese Tactics and Strategies: an Imitation of Russia?

In recent years, the use of information warfare by non-western nations has attracted considerable attention from scholars and policymakers alike. China, in particular, has emerged as a significant actor in this domain, with a growing body of literature exploring the strategies, tactics, and objectives of Chinese information warfare. Notable among these works are the studies by Lu (2022) and Zhang (2020), who offer valuable insights into the nature and scope of Chinese influence operations. Lu’s (2022) research on China’s use of state-sponsored disinformation highlights the subtle nature of these operations, which aim to create confusion and obscure the truth rather than directly attacking opponents. She argues that disinformation consolidates the authoritarian party-state and builds the Chinese nation (Lu, 2022: 103).

Similarly, Zhang’s (2020) research on China’s influence operations targeting Taiwan offers valuable policy recommendations for countering these efforts. Zhang argues that China undermines Taiwan’s democracy and sovereignty by disseminating false information and promoting pro-China narratives. He argues that to counter influence operations effectively, democratic institutions must adopt comprehensive strategies encompassing various aspects of society, including education, media regulation, and government-led responses. By doing so, these institutions can better defend themselves against the threat of foreign influence operations.

A broader perspective has been adopted by Curtis (2021), who offers a strategic analysis of Chinese information warfare efforts, particularly its goal of undermining US hegemony. According to Curtis, the Chinese government has invested heavily in information efforts since the late 1990s, aimed at projecting a positive image of itself and portraying the United States
as a declining power. In recent years, Chinese officials have shifted to a more aggressive form of diplomacy known as ‘wolf warrior diplomacy,’ which involves attacking any criticism of China’s carefully curated image. This strategy exploits the openness of democratic societies and aims to erode trust in their institutions and processes, thus advancing China’s vision of a new world order (Curtis, 2021: 230).

Overall, the studies suggest that while Russia and China share the goal of upending the current US-led global system, they differ in their information warfare tactics. Specifically, China seeks to promote its alternative system, while Russia aims to discredit the current system as flawed.

2.1.4. China’s Role in Ukraine: a Sino-Russian Relationship?

The role of China in the Ukraine crisis has been a subject of discussion in several scholarly works, particularly concerning the implications of the Sino-Russo relationship on the conflict and global security. Notably, Kuznetsov (2016), Haran (2015), and García & Modlin (2022) have examined this issue in detail. For example, Kuznetsov (2016) utilizes official statements and media reports in a qualitative content analysis to examine China’s position on the Ukrainian Euro-maidan crisis over Crimea and sanctions against Russia. The article’s main finding regarding China’s role is that Being’s position has evolved from neutral to supporting a strategic partnership with Russia by opposing the Western sanctions policy against Russia. The result is consistent with the findings obtained by Haran (2015), who observes that Russia has pursued a closer relationship with China to circumvent Western sanctions. Notably, Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its growing alignment with China have amplified the importance of the United States reasserting its commitment to its allies.

While previous studies have primarily focused on China’s role between the start of the war in 2014 and the full-scale invasion, García & Modlin (2022) have examined China’s role in the post-invasion period. The study argues that the Sino-Russo relationship is a limited partnership centered on accelerating the emergence of a multipolar world order to reduce US hegemony. The authors assert that this partnership is not based on a shared solid political or economic agenda but on their independent and joint objectives to further their relative power towards the US within the international system (ibid., 23). While China and Russia share a
vision for a multipolar international order, they disagree on the distribution of power within this system. For instance, China sees the EU as a significant power pole in the international system, while Russia perceives it as a security threat. Despite both countries wanting the EU to distance itself from the United States, the Kremlin views the European bloc with suspicion, while China regards it as a crucial trading partner.

Moreover, the authors suggest that the Ukraine war has presented China with a dilemma in navigating its partnership with Russia. On the one hand, China risks damaging its reputation as a defender of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference by providing rhetorical cover to Russia for the invasion. On the other hand, the war presents China with an opportunity to develop its hegemony in Asia by assisting developing countries affected by the economic sanctions imposed by the US and its allies (ibid., 27-31). Overall, García & Modlin’s (2022) study provides insights into China’s role in the Ukraine crisis, highlighting the challenges and opportunities the Sino-Russo relationship presents for international security and stability.

A central theme in these studies is the growing prominence of information warfare and influence operations used by major powers such as Russia and China to achieve their strategic objectives. These studies provide a nuanced understanding of China’s role in the Ukraine crisis, its relationship with Russia, the complex and dynamic nature of international relations, and China’s role in shaping them. Furthermore, these studies emphasize the need for a comprehensive analysis of the China-Russia nexus’ impact in the information domain and the implications of their evolving relationship for international security. This thesis will thus be situated in the growing literature on information warfare by examining how China and Russia conduct influence operations on Twitter in the context of the Ukraine war.
3. Theoretical Framework: Sharp Power and Policy Transfer

In order to explore how Russia and China are utilizing their information warfare efforts in the Ukraine war to alter the balance of power in the international system, this thesis draws on a broader set of International Relations literature. By building on theoretical assumptions from the concept of *sharp power* and previous research on *policy transfer*, an analytical framework is deductively constructed that allows for a better understanding of the messaging and tactics used in current Chinese and Russian influence operations. A major advantage of combining these two strands of research is that the resulting analytical framework provides theoretically underpinned pathways to identify how and why the two actors influence operations possibly align and thus in which intersectional points that synergetic effects might occur.

3.1. Information Warfare as a Tool of Statecraft

To develop a comprehensive understanding of China and Russia’s information warfare operations, it is crucial to contextualize their activities within a broader theoretical and empirical framework. As the international system evolves, new forms of competition and cooperation have emerged, with revisionist actors challenging the existing order (Balcaen et al., 2021: 1). Against this backdrop, China and Russia have demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the current US-led order and actively sought to reshape the system in favor of their preferred ideas, norms, and autocratic governance model (Walker, 2018: 11). In this context, previous notions of contrasting ‘hard power’ with ‘soft power’ has proven theoretically insufficient to explain the observed behavior of aforementioned states. As ‘soft power’ seeks to project a positive image (Nye, 2008), ‘sharp power’ is a more pessimistic interpretation that refers to state actions that aim to sow disruption and undermine democratic values by
manipulating the political and information environment of targeted countries (Chow-Bing, 2022: 224; Walker, 2018: 11f).

Given this definition, the concept of sharp power can be understood through a realist perspective. A point of departure in this thesis is how realism emphasizes the role of power and self-help in shaping international politics (Waltz, 1988); therefore, in this context, information warfare, influence operations, and disinformation are viewed as foreign policy tools employed by states to achieve their strategic objectives. Information warfare, influence operations, and disinformation are used to weaken the credibility of opponents, sow discord and instability, and shift the balance of power in favor of the deploying state. From a rational actor perspective, these concepts provide a lens through which to understand the evolving nature of power and influence in the contemporary international system, particularly how influence operations are used to diminish adversaries’ capabilities. By doing so, states seek to enhance their power and influence while weakening their opponents, ultimately shaping the broader international system to their advantage.

3.2. Information Warfare Diffusion

In order to examine to what extent the Russian and Chines influence operations align and create synergetic effects, the analytical framework draws on research that concerns how and why specific traits and state behavior migrate from one state to another.

In policy studies, policy transfer is defined as a process by which one political entity’s policymaking and policy outcomes influence those in other political entities (Blatter et al., 2022: 806). Previous research on cross-national policy transfer has emphasized the importance of international interdependence, which assumes that one country’s actions can affect others’ actions (Gilardi, 2012; LaCombe & Boehmke, 2020). This process is often characterized by a combination of incentives and pressure used to shape the policy decisions of other countries (Simmons et al., 2006). An overall consensus on why and how policy transfers occur is attributed to four causal mechanisms; learning, competition, imitation, and coercion (Simmons et al., 2006; Shipan and Volden, 2008).
A common understanding is that policy adaption is spread horizontally through mechanisms such as learning, competition, and imitation, in contrast to coercion, a top-down process in which more powerful countries pressure less powerful countries to adopt a preferred policy (LaCombe & Boehmke, 2020). The scope and argument of this thesis make it illogical to use the mechanism of coercion as an analytical reference point to examine the information warfare operations of Russia and China. Instead, the mechanisms of learning, imitation, and competition, analyzed through the theoretical framework of sharp power, serve as valid reference points for exploring potential synergies resulting from the alignment of their influence efforts.

First, learning as a policy transfer process occurs when a polity observes policy outcomes in other polities and utilizes that information to inform policy decisions. In this process, a state may adopt relevant components of a policy that have proven effective in achieving a desired outcome in another polity (LaCombe & Boehmke 2020: 4). Second, imitation as a process of policy transfer occurs when a polity seeks policy ideas from another polity solely based on their shared attributes, without necessarily examining the policy outcomes (Shipan & Volden, 2008). Unlike learning, imitation relies on actor characteristics rather than policy outcomes to inform policy adoption decisions (LaCombe & Boehmke 2020: 4). Finally, the third mechanism is competition, where polities adopt policies to gain a competitive edge. In this process, incentives to adopt policies rely on other polities’ observed policy outcomes in relation to their own polity (ibid., 4).

3.3. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework comprises two analytical domains that will be used to explore possible overlaps and alignments in the influence operations employed by Russia and China. The first domain focuses on the messaging and tactics used by the two countries in their influence operations, while the second domain draws on theoretical concepts from the policy transfer literature, specifically cooperation, emulation, and competition, to identify potential convergence and synergetic effects.
This typology provides a systematic approach to categorize and analyze how Russia and China use information warfare as a means of influence and thus responds to the thesis’s goal to characterize the nature of Chinese and Russian information warfare and to uncover any possible convergence and synergies that could pose a threat to international security.

3.3.1. Influence Operations: Tactics and Content

To ensure an analytically robust analysis of China and Russia’s information warfare, this thesis differentiates between the components that constitute their influence operations. Specifically, the disinformation disseminated by state actors on social media is defined as a systematic process of information warfare consisting of two mutually reinforcing components: (1) the tactics and (2) the content. Analyzing the tactics and content makes it possible to uncover the objectives of the two states in their information warfare efforts, both at the strategic and operational levels.

Tactics (1) can broadly be defined as the methods and techniques for disseminating disinformation. As an analytical domain, it responds to how influence operations are carried out. For example, this domain elucidates which actors are involved, the targets, and what types of messaging are being utilized. Content (2) refers to the narratives and overall message disseminated in influence operations. An assumption is that the alignment of narratives from China and Russia will create an amplified effect on the intended target. Furthermore, the aim of the influence operations can share similarities both on an operational and strategic level. For example, the operations can share broader strategic goals, such as undermining the US, but differ in their immediate aim, which would be target specific.

3.3.2. Cooperation, Emulation, and Competition

The second analytical domain involves identifying the processes through which possible alignments of information operations can occur. Drawing on the policy transfer literature, this framework identifies three theoretical explanations for potential alignment: cooperation, emulation, and competition. These processes are not mutually exclusive and can coincide.
Cooperation refers to the active engagement of actors in sharing tradecraft, including coordination of targets and messaging. On the other hand, emulation is a unilateral process in which an actor bases its information warfare on another actor’s previous efforts. Emulation thus refers to one actor adopting the tactics or content of the other due to perceived success or effectiveness. This concept combines the theoretical notions of learning and imitation from the policy transfer literature. The final theoretical explanation for possible synergetic effects in the information environment is competition. Although the actors’ broader strategic objectives may align, competition can occur if their conduct undermines each other’s strategic position. Furthermore, competition can also refer to a situation where the two actors engage in similar operations intending to achieve similar objectives but through different means. By examining these processes, the framework aims to uncover any potential alignments and synergies in the influence efforts of China and Russia.

![Diagram](image)

**Fig 1.** The analytical framework draws on theoretical assumptions from sharp power and policy transfer.
4. Methodology

This study analyzes the components and interplay of Russian and Chinese influence operations within the context of the Ukraine war to understand the impact of the practice and relationship on international security. To that end, the study focuses predominantly on disinformation disseminated on Twitter during the initial year of the full-scale conflict (February 24th, 2022 - February 24th, 2023) to capture possible influx points where messaging, tactics, and objectives converge and generate synergistic effects.

4.1. Research Design

The study’s research design involves a mixed methodology approach anchored in a comparative case study framework. Specifically, the thesis aims to compare and examine the influence operations conducted by Russia and China in the context of the Ukraine war during the initial year of the full scale conflict. To achieve this objective, a single-N case study examines and contrasts disinformation disseminated on Twitter by official state-backed accounts of both countries. The aim is to assess potential synergies arising from aligning messaging, tactics, and objectives. A major advantage of using a single-N case study situated in a comparative context is that it provides contextual depth and density to understanding complex phenomena (Lamont, 2015: 127-131; George & Bennet, 2005: 80f).

4.1.1. The Ukraine War as a Case Study

To specify and delimit the scope of the investigation, the topical case of the Ukraine war serves as a case study to examine how authoritarian states utilize sharp power as a foreign policy tool in the information environment. The case thus provides an empirical lens through
which to understand the changing nature of power and influence in the contemporary international system, particularly how influence operations are used to weaken adversaries’ capabilities. Thus, the analysis consists of an in-depth examination of the influence operations conducted by China and Russia in the Ukraine conflict aimed at altering the existing balance of power.

The Ukraine case is highly significant as it provides an opportunity to reveal how authoritarian states employ information warfare in practice. Additionally, it serves as a prime example of how revisionist authoritarian state actors use influence operations to reshape the current distribution of power (Balcaen et al., 2021). The case is thus used as an empirical foundation to address the two aims of the thesis; (1) to characterize the nature and relationship of Chinese and Russian influence operations and (2) to uncover any possible alignments and synergies that could potentially undermine international security.

As demonstrated in the literature review, Russia has a long history of utilizing information warfare as a strategic tool. Considering that the Ukraine conflict is attributed to Russian involvement, their practice of conducting information warfare serves as a reference point (i.e., Ideal type, see Weber, 1949) in the comparative analysis of Chinese practice. This comparative approach thus facilitates the examination of potential convergence between the two actors’ practices, including any synergistic effects that may arise. Additionally, the Ukraine case allows for evaluating the Sino-Russian disinformation nexus regarding how coordination, emulation, or competition of their influence efforts can generate possible convergence in messaging and tactics.

Furthermore, by opting for an descriptive interpretive analysis, the methodological basis for selecting the Ukraine war as a case study rest on its capacity to furnish contextual depth and density to the phenomenon under investigation rather than its capacity to generate causal inference. Accordingly, research designs that prioritize the maximization of causal inference, such as ‘least likely’ and ‘most similar’, are not considered. Instead, the Ukraine war is considered a ‘crucial’ case due to its intrinsic properties (Lamont, 2015: 132ff; George & Bennet 2005: 50f, 80, 121).

The case is considered a crucial case based on the following parameters. Firstly, the Ukraine war can potentially reshape the global security order. The war has significant implications for international security as it has challenged the European security order by
introducing a new era of revisionist actors seeking to assert their power in the international arena (Averre, 2016). Thus, revisionist states’ use of information warfare seriously threatens international stability. Understanding the dynamics of the influence operations is thus critical to developing effective strategies for countering these threats.

Secondly, the case is intimately connected to a potential future conflict between China and the US over Taiwan. China’s relationship with Taiwan is widely regarded as one of the most complex security challenges to future international stability. It is assumed that Russia’s conduct in the Ukraine war will shape China’s behavior towards Taiwan by testing and revealing the effectiveness of sharp power as a foreign policy tool on both tactical and strategic levels. As such, the case is highly relevant to understanding how revisionist actors utilize the information domain as a belligerent space and how their actions can undermine the international security order.

4.1.2. Data: Twitter and Social Media

The primary data examined in the thesis comprises statistical data that tracks narratives and topics promoted by Russian and Chinese state-backed outlets on Twitter. The data is sourced from the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD), a non-partisan project housed by the non-profit think tank The German Marshal Found (GMF). The data is generated using several interface tools developed by ASD that extract and present data according to variables with which the researcher exposes the interface. The interfaces monitor over 700 Twitter accounts and 25 state-sponsored media outlets linked to Russian and Chinese government entities. They are thus a valuable resource for understanding the aim and spread of government-sponsored messaging through different information channels.

The second data set examined in the thesis is sourced from EUvsDisinfo, an EU project led by the East StratCom Task Force that addresses and responds to Russian disinformation aimed at EU member states. The EUvsDisinfo provides a searchable open-source database comprising over 15,000 data samples of disinformation disseminated by Russia aimed at the EU. The samples of disinformation are compiled by monitoring various media sources in over 15 languages.
A major advantage of using social media data is the ability to monitor large amounts of social interactions and behavior in an unobtrusive way (Barberá & Steinert-Threlkeld, 2020: 405). Collecting data in a non-obtrusive way reduced the risk of introducing biases from the respondents (Halperin & Heath, 2020: 69ff), which in the context of this project is of primary concern as the studied behavior is meant to manipulate and deceive adversaries. Additionally, social media data provides ample opportunities for both in-depth interpretive analysis and macro-scale perspectives in comparative settings, as the data contains a high degree of temporal and spatial granularity (Barberá & Steinert-Threlkeld, 2020: 406). It is particularly beneficial in this project as the temporal and spatial characteristics of the data offer the ability to uncover patterns and longitudinal trends in the disinformation spread by state-backed accounts. Moreover, the heterogeneity in the length of text and format facilitates a systematic comparison when analyzing the qualitative content of disinformation disseminated on social media.

However, the data has certain limitations. First, the Twitter data has been obtained through the interfaces provided by ASD, which can introduce biases during data processing. Nevertheless, ASD is transparent with its methodology and provides clear information on how the data has been processed and presented through its interface. Second, the Twitter metadata is not accessible, which may compromise the transparency of the data. It is unknown, for example, whether the platform algorithms accurately present the data. To address these limitations and ensure the validity of the data, the thesis uses a triangulation approach by incorporating two separate databases, namely the ASD Twitter aggregate and the EUvsDisinfo database. Additionally, a nested mixed-methods approach is adopted to strengthen the validity of the inferences further.

4.1.3. Mixed Methods

A mixed methods approach is employed as an in-case method for data analysis. The Chinese and Russian practice of conducting influence operations is analyzed by combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis. A major advantage of combining quantitative and qualitative methods is that it adds value to the inferences by enhancing the study’s validity (Harbers & Ingram, 2020: 1117). It is particularly beneficial for understanding
information warfare as the methodological approach adds value in ways that would be impossible using only a quantitative or qualitative method in isolation. The design thus allows for producing valid descriptive inference in a robust, systematic, and replicable way (Gerring, 2017: xxi)

A common critique is that mixed methods can be perceived as an ‘everything goes’ approach to research (Harbers & Ingram, 2020: 1119); therefore, to ensure the validity and reliability of the study, it is crucial to fully specify the logic behind the methodological design choices in the thesis. In this study, the data is collected from the same class of data, i.e., integrated data, and analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. In contrast to a parallel data approach, utilizing integrated data is particularly useful as the sequence of the analysis’s qualitative and quantitative phases informs and builds on each other. Thus, the research design seeks to produce a nested inference by combining qualitative and quantitative methods to integrate data. Hence, I seek to understand political and social phenomena by drawing on both statistical and textual observations from the same class of data (Brady & Collier, 2004: 298).

A major advantage of a nested approach is that the research process allows for alternating between inductive and deductive phases and, thus, between exploratory and confirmatory phases (Harbers & Ingram, 2020: 1119). Hence, the quantitative analysis is used to inform the qualitative analysis and vice versa. A nested approach to mixed methods is thus beneficial as the research aims to characterize both the nature and relationship of China and Russia’s information warfare.

4.1.4. Research Process

The research employed an interpretive analysis of qualitative and quantitative data guided by sharp power and policy transfer theoretical frameworks. To systematically categorize and classify the nature and relationship of the Russian and Chinese influence operations, the research process began with an inductive explorative phase in which the most salient themes of Russian disinformation were identified. Using the EUvsDisinfo database as a starting point, a search on Russian disinformation disseminated from February 24th, 2022, to February 24th, 2023, was made. The search was delimited to include the US mentioned in the
Russian disinformation in order to capture information efforts aimed at reshaping the distribution of power in the international system. The search gained 431 results\(^1\). Once the samples were extracted, an inductive explorative reading of the material was conducted to search for broader themes and patterns. After the first reading, broad general themes and narratives such as “NATO”, “the West”, “the US,” as well as “Nord Stream”, “Bioweapons,” and “Ukraine nazi” emerged from the data. Several re-readings of the material were conducted to refine the cluster of narratives. Following this phase of the research, a comparison of the findings was made towards the official position of the Russian government by examining speeches delivered by President Putin during the same timeframe.

Once this phase of the research process was completed, a classification and characterization of Russian information warfare in the context of the Ukraine war were established. The result was conceptualized as an ideal type of Russian information warfare and was used as a reference point for comparison with Chinese practices. To ensure a systematic comparative approach, the official position of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was first evaluated by examining official communications such as speeches and press releases. Once the official position was established, a quantitative descriptive analysis informed by the Russian themes and narratives established prior was carried out. In order to determine whether the Chinese disinformation ecosystem had picked up the narratives, the Chinese use of the Russian narratives was compared between two timeframes; during the year leading up to the invasion in 2022 and the year after the invasion. By doing so, the goal was to determine whether there was an increase in the use of these narratives that would indicate a change in the Chinese messaging, thus indicating a policy transfer from the Russian operations.

The quantitative inferences were then corroborated with an in-depth analysis of the content of the Chinese tweets. To further ensure a systematic approach, a comparative analysis of the specific discursive elements that comprise the narratives was carried out between the two countries. The coding used for assessing the tweets was based partly on the theoretical framework and partly on the inductive phase conducted earlier. For instance, when examining Chinese discourse on Twitter, the content was evaluated using categories such as “Ukraine” (in terms of sovereignty and as an actor) and “War,” sorted by the classification of

\(^1\) EUvsDisinfo
Positive*, Neutral*, or Negative*. Specific narratives such as “NATO expansion” and “The West” were also assessed in the context of the long-term Chinese strategic aims, such as promoting an alternative governing system to the current US-led order. The sampling strategy was determined based on the level of engagement the tweets received, as the most retweeted and liked tweets are considered to have the most significant impact.

To conclude, the mixed-methods approach used in this study provides a pathway to a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the nature and interplay of Russian and Chinese influence operations in the context of the Ukraine conflict. By combining quantitative and qualitative techniques, the study seeks to provide a robust and reliable data analysis while also providing an in-depth examination of the content and tactics of the influence operations. By comparing and contrasting the disinformation narratives employed by both countries, it is possible to gain a more nuanced understanding of the Sino-Russian relationship beyond a simplistic depiction as a soft ‘alliance of convenience’ (Lubina, 2017) aimed at reshaping the current distribution of power. Depending on which narratives are reproduced and how, it is possible to uncover the objectives and tactics that characterize the Russian and Chinese disinformation nexus. By doing so, it is also possible to infer to what extent the convergence of their influence operations is coordinated, emulated, or a product of competition.
5. Analysis: The Russian and Chinese Disinformation Nexus

This chapter aims to capture the distinct relationship forged between Russian and Chinese influence operations on Twitter during the first year of the full-scale Ukraine war.

5.1. Russia: Information Warfare in the Ukraine War

The influence operations surrounding the Ukraine war conducted by Russia have primarily focused on constructing narratives that legitimize and justify the war and the full-scale invasion that occurred in February 2022. Officially, the Kremlin has depicted the conflict as a necessary step towards liberating Ukraine from its purported ‘nazi regime’ and saving the Russian population in Ukraine from genocide. Following the setbacks on the battlefield, the principal Kremlin narrative sought to justify the war by depicting the West and the Ukraine leadership as threatening Russian national security. Consequently, to justify the aggression, Russia has conveyed the need to denazify Ukraine and retake the territory to maintain a secure Russia under existential threat from the West. The objectives of the Kremlin’s influence efforts are evident in the words of President Putin when addressing the federal assembly one year after the invasion in 2022.

One year ago, to protect the people in our historical lands, to ensure the security of our country, and to eliminate the threat coming from the neo-Nazi regime that had taken hold in Ukraine after the 2014 coup, it was decided to begin the special military operation. […] the promises of Western leaders, their assurances that they were striving for peace in Donbass turned out to be a sham and outright lies (Putin, 2023).

A way for Russia to disseminate and emphasize the official narrative has been to wage an information war aimed at Western liberal democracies. By utilizing the information sphere as
a domain for hostile influence activities, Russia has seemingly sought to fulfill two aims with their information warfare; first, (1) to construct a justification for war, both domestically and internationally, and second, (2) to undermine Western support for Ukraine caused by disseminating and emphasizing narratives that showcase the negative aspects of supporting a prolonged conflict.

Further analysis of the data revealed that the most salient narrative themes used to cement the aims mentioned above were, in descending order, NATO’s expansion, Nord Stream, Bioweapons in Ukraine, and the Nazification of Ukraine.

![Fig 2. Frequency of Russian disinformation narratives.](image)

As this data illustrates the frequency of the content disseminated to a Western audience in the global north, a further thematic categorization is useful to uncover the mechanisms of the Russian disinformation apparatus. The data suggest that there are three comprehensive categories of themes relating back to the aims of information warfare in the Ukraine conflict. The messaging can be sorted into narratives that (1) justify the war, (2) weaken Western support, and (3) flood the information space with conspiracy theories. First, the data indicate that narratives that aim to justify and legitimize the conflict are prioritized. This category contains the narrative that the war is borne out of necessity due to NATO and Western expansion and the need to denazify Ukraine. Second, the data further suggest that efforts to undermine Western support have predominantly occupied energy politics, with the Nord Stream explosions being a centerpiece of Russian disinformation. And third, as the narrative

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2 EUvsDisinfo
of the bioweapons lab in Ukraine suggests, Moscow is utilizing conspiracy theories to flood and obscure the information space.

5.1.1. Nato Expansion

As the first inductive part of the analysis has demonstrated, the most prominent theme disseminated during the renewed part of the Ukraine conflict has been the NATO expansion as a casus belli. Several different versions of this theme have been disseminated over the cause of the conflict, with one example being the narrative spread on blogs and podcasts and picked up on by the EUvsDisinfo database on February 7th, 2023: "Rob Bauer, one of the heads of NATO’s military committee, said the alliance is ready for a direct confrontation with Russia. Unfortunately, such statements can be trusted, because NATO is populated by raging madmen.” (EUvsDisinfo, 2023a). Another similar narrative published in German-speaking press on May 18th, 2022, also picked up by the EUvsDisinfo database: "Moscow’s special operation in Ukraine is due to the North Atlantic Alliance’s persistent expansion, but also to the West’s continued unwillingness to address the Kremlin’s concerns about its own security.” (EUvsDisinfo, 2023b)

The above pieces of disinformation are extracted from a large pool of similar narratives disseminated by Russian operatives and thus represent how the Kremlin seeks to construct a convincing narrative that justifies their invasion of Ukraine. However, it is worth noting that there are divergent signals emanating from the Russian government in their justification for war. The theme that Russia is defending itself due to NATO expansion rests on the notion that there is a war in Ukraine, which conversely is prohibited from mentioning in Russian domestic media. The official government position is that the war is required to be referred to as a ‘special military operation’ (Roth, 2022), which thus produces inconsistency and ambiguity in the influence operations aimed at domestic and non-Western audiences, undermining efforts to build consensus both domestically and internationally that the invasion was necessary to defend Russia against NATO expansionist threats.

Russia’s focus on NATO expansion as a reason for war is, to a great extent, reproduced in the Twitter information sphere, both by diplomatic accounts and by state-backed media accounts. The messaging is clear and seeks to portray NATO and the West’s expansion as a
security threat to Russia. In the 50 most engaged tweets, various versions of the theme appear that call out ‘the West’s double standard’ and ‘US hegemonism’. For example, @mfa_russia, a government-backed account, tweeted: ”President Putin: The calls to Ukraine to keep fighting and to abandon any further negotiations prove that the US and NATO do not care for the Ukrainian people’s interests. They use Ukraine to reinforce their role and positions in the world, to reaffirm their hegemony.” (MFA Russia, 2022)

Another version of the theme was tweeted by @EmbassyofRussia: ”We took note of one of the most commonly used wording in the media these days about Russian military operation “is the largest conventional military attack that’s been seen since WWII”. One question: what about NATO bombings of Yugoslavia? Wasn’t that in Europe?” (Russia in RSA, 2022)

5.1.2. Ukraine: a Nazi State

Another narrative aimed at justifying the invasion is the claim that the Ukrainian leadership consists of Nazis and that the invasion was necessary to denazify Ukraine. Accordingly, the narrative aims to build consensus for the war by stirring up sentiment claiming that the Soviet World War II experience is intimately linked to modern Russian identity (Dickinson, 2022). However, the narrative seems to have gained less success on an international level to justify the aggression, as international media have widely debunked and ridiculed this narrative. The conspiratorial and illogical nature of the narrative may have contributed to an inconsistency in the messaging intended for a foreign audience, particularly for China and the global south, by shifting the focus away from real geopolitical concerns such as NATO expansion and perceived negative consequences of Western hegemony.

An interesting finding is that the disinformation disseminated on Twitter conveying the need to denazify Ukraine was most prominent during the first three months of the war, to diminish sharply for the rest of the examined period. During the first three months of the war (February 24th - May 24th), Nazi* was tweeted 4,333 times; during the next three months,

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3 ASD Tracker
the number of tweets dropped to 1,605. If the data is broken down to the number of tweets per day, the graph looks like this:

![Tweets by Day](image)

**Graph 1. "Nazi*" tweeted by Russian Twitter accounts**

The data reveal that the Kremlin has somewhat abandoned the narrative as a talking point to justify the war. The data thus suggest that Kremlin shifted its strategy from seeking to justify the war to undermining Western support for the Ukrainian war effort. It is a reasonable inference given that the abandonment of the narrative corresponds to the initial losses on the battlefield, and thus the Russian realization that the war aims to occupy Ukraine and swiftly install a pro-Russian puppet government was not achievable in the timeframe set by the Kremlin. Consequently, the data indicates an evolving strategy from the Kremlin adapting to a changing strategic environment.

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4 ASD Tracker
5.1.3. Nord Stream

A major node in the Russian disinformation efforts has been linking the Nord Stream pipeline explosions to the US, which, as a narrative, can be interpreted as to fulfill several aims. First, as a component in Russian information warfare, the event highlights the asymmetrical energy dependence between Europe and Russia. Capitalizing on the sabotage thus acts as a coercive tool for Russia aimed at Western societies. Second, the data suggest that one incentive for utilizing the explosions in their influence efforts has been to sow discord between Europe and the US, as many of the tweets depict Washington as the culprit and highlight the negative consequences for Europe. For example, a prominent narrative that conveys this idea is that the "US intelligence agencies were most likely behind last September’s sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines." (EUvsDisinfo, 2023c). By blaming the US for the explosions, the narrative seeks to weaken Western support for the war and flood the information space with conspiracy theories. As noted in the literature review, flooding the information domain has been a long-standing practice in Russian information warfare.

Accordingly, the narrative of US involvement gained significant traction among Kremlin-backed Twitter accounts in the two months following the incident. The narrative’s prominence on Twitter demonstrates how the Kremlin effectively utilized the explosions as part of its information warfare strategy to achieve its wider strategic objectives, regardless of whether they were involved in the attack or not. Further analysis of the qualitative Twitter data suggests that Russia has sought to frame the US for the explosions by showcasing that the US had the means and motive to do so. Furthermore, Russian official Twitter accounts emphasized that destroying the gas lines would not benefit Russia strategically, and therefore they could not be responsible for the attack, as these tweets demonstrate, first from @wyattreed13:

You can tell who’s behind the Nord Stream sabotage just by the media response. There’d be non-stop coverage if they actually thought it was Russia. But it’s only been a week and arguably the most geopolitically significant terror attack since 9/11 has already been memory-holed. (Reed, 2022)
And the tweet by @aaronjmate:

According to @SecBlinken, the Nord Stream pipeline bombing "offers tremendous strategic opportunity for the years to come." Too bad that this tremendous opportunity for DC bureaucrats will come at the expense of everyone else, especially this coming winter. (Maté, 2022)

As well as the tweet from @RachBlevins

The next time an EU politician claims Russia is “using energy as a weapon,” just remember that even in the face of historic sanctions and the attacks on Nord Stream, Putin is still offering to send gas on the undamaged line. It’s Europe that rejects it—and then blames Russia. (Blevins, 2022)

The use of the narrative that links the US to the Nord Stream explosion can thus be interpreted to serve Russia’s war aims, as it seeks to undermine Western support for the Ukraine war effort. The narrative furthermore signifies a wider strategy to sow discord in international unity by single out the US and blaming them for the energy crisis in the EU. By blaming the US, Russia shifts the focus from its widely internationally condemned actions in Ukraine to showcasing how the US, an integral and critical component in the European security architecture, engages in norm-breaking behavior that undermines the European security order.

5.1.4. Biolabs in Ukraine

Another aspect of the Kremlin’s influence efforts has been to promote the narrative that the US is responsible for Biolabs and bioweapons testing in Ukraine. This narrative has been used throughout the war and can be interpreted to have several aims. First, it promotes an image of the US as a malicious actor; second, it serves to justify the war; and third, it floods the information domain by spreading conspiracy theories.

The influence operation by Russia may leverage earlier disputed Chinese narratives on Covid-19, which raise doubts about the disease’s origins. Thus, Russian diplomats’ persistent use of the talking point on Twitter is interesting as it seems to emulate previous Chinese
influence efforts. The key phrase Bio* + lab* has been tweeted by Russian accounts 1,088 times during the first year since the invasion. Nonetheless, regarding the emulation and coordination of Chinese and Russian influence operations, an interesting theoretical notion is that in some cases, the policy transfer seems to flow from China to Russia and not the other way around. The data suggests that Russia is adopting and replicating China’s tactics in spreading disinformation related to Covid-19 during the pandemic, indicating that Russia is learning and imitating China’s influence efforts.

5.2. China: Information Warfare in the Ukraine War

The People’s Republic of China’s official stance on the Ukraine-Russia conflict has been ambivalent and has somewhat evolved during the first year since the invasion. In February 2022, a few days after the invasion of Ukraine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (FMPRC) released a five-point position paper outlining China’s stance on the war. The paper emphasized the importance of “territorial integrity of all countries should be respected and protected” (FMPRC, 2022), suggesting that China aims to maintain a neutral position and not endorse Russia’s actions in Ukraine.

However, the document also contains a statement regarding the global and European security order in which China declares that “the legitimate security concerns of all countries should be respected. Given NATO’s five consecutive rounds of eastward expansion, Russia’s legitimate security demands ought to be taken seriously and properly addressed” (FMPRC, 2022). Including the notion that ‘NATO expansion is a legitimate security concern’ in the official statement suggests that China, to some extent, supports the action taken by Russia in the conflict. Conversely, a similar document produced a year later excludes the langue depicting NATO as a security concern (FMPRC, 2023), which, in turn, suggests that China’s official position on the matter is to not endorse Russian actions in Ukraine.

5 ASD Tracker
When examining disinformation disseminated by China, it is central to map the extent to which Chinese official channels have adopted and promoted the same themes and narratives identified earlier in the analysis of Russian disinformation. This approach can reveal any potential convergences in the messaging between the two countries and, thus, any potential areas where their efforts might be amplified due to synergy.

5.2.1. Nato Expansion

Beginning with the most prominent Russian narrative that portrays NATO’s expansion as a security concern and a legitimate cause for war, the data indicates that the narrative has been picked up, tweeted, and retweeted to a great extent by Chinese state control media outlets and official diplomatic accounts since the start of the invasion. The data analysis reveals that Chinese accounts tweeted the phrase NATO 1,828\(^6\) times during the year preceding the invasion. During the first year after the invasion, the accounts tweeted the phrase 8,300 times\(^7\).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>2021.02.24-2022.02.24</th>
<th>2022.02.24-2023.02.24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>10,393</td>
<td>17,920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1,828</td>
<td>8,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global media</td>
<td>1,136</td>
<td>2,654</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. NATO mentions on Twitter by government and media accounts

The data indicates a notable rise in tweets from Chinese state-controlled media and government accounts related to NATO, which implies some correlation with the Russian narrative. However, as shown in Table 1, there was also a substantial increase in global media’s references to NATO on Twitter, which is unsurprising given the magnitude of the invasion and NATO’s role in the conflict. Therefore, to assess the degree of alignment in the

\(^6\) ASD Tracker

\(^7\) ASD Tracker
official messaging between the two countries, a refinement of the data points is required to enhance the reliability.

Accordingly, a further analysis of official diplomatic accounts linked to official government sources reveals a close correlation between the countries. As demonstrated in Table 2, Russian and Chinese diplomatic tweets containing the phrasing NATO* + Ukr* during the first year after the invasion are closely aligned with 1,287 Russian tweets and 768 Chinese tweets. What is striking about the figures in this table is the sharp increase in the mention of NATO by Chinese accounts from the year before the invasion to the first year after the invasion. The rise from 52 to 768 tweets is a 1377% increase, which suggests that the narrative from Russia is being picked up by official Chinese accounts. The sharp increase in the number of mentions indicates that the Chinese state has given the theme priority and, thus, that the disinformation efforts by the Chinese state align with the Russian narrative to some extent.

The alignment of Chinese messaging with the Russian narrative indicates that Beijing seeks to coordinate its messaging as a strategic measure, either to strengthen ties with the Kremlin or to amplify anti-Americanism and anti-NATO sentiments to undermine the current US-led international order.

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<th>2021.02.24-2022.02.24</th>
<th>2022.02.24-2023.02.24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia, diplomatic accounts</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>1,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China, diplomatic accounts</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>768</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. NATO* + Ukr* mentions on Twitter by diplomatic accounts

Further analysis of the qualitative data revealed that Chinese government officials conveyed negative sentiments towards the US and NATO, while attributing the war in Ukraine to the West, thus reproducing Russian discourse. For example, showcased in this widely retweeted tweet by @MFA_China: "The Ukraine crisis has taught the world many lessons: Clinging to

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8 ASD Tracker
9 ASD Tracker
the Cold War mentality leads to antagonism & confrontation; Stoking bloc confrontation leads to conflict & war; Applying double-standard will certainly backfire.” (Spokesperson 发言人办公室, 2023). And in this example by @zlj517: “NATO is a “defensive” alliance? Joke of the century.” (Zhao, 2023)

An interesting finding that emerged from the qualitative Twitter data is that Chinese diplomatic accounts on Twitter, to a great extent, have framed US involvement in previous wars as a double standard in the context of the Russian-Ukraine war. By emphasizing perceived US hypocrisy, the discourse aligns with immediate Russian goals to construct a case for war while simultaneously reflecting broader Chinese aims to undermine US credibility as an arbiter of legitimate behavior in the international system. Thus, it is possible to infer that China is leveraging the Ukraine-Russia conflict to advance its long-term goals, such as replacing the current international system with an alternative model and testing strategies for a potential future conflict with the West over Taiwan. This notion is prevalent in the tweet from @CGMeifangZhang;

The US was not at war for only 16 years throughout its 240+ history. The US launched 7 times more military operations after the Cold War. Statistics released by the US Congress have shown the world the bellicose & hegemonic nature of US rules. (Meifang, 2022)

And similarly in a tweet from @spokespersonCHN which said:

Read @secBlinken’s latest speech on China. He said the US is ”not looking for conflict or a new Cold War”. Yet the speech sounded more like a declaration of all-out strategic competition or war against China. @StateDept. (Chunying, 2022)

Consequently, these tweets illustrate how Chinese diplomatic accounts attempt to undermine US credibility by characterizing the US as a bellicose and hegemonic power.

The dataset also reveals how official Chinese accounts have positioned themselves regarding Ukraine, Russia, and the ongoing war. One notable trend is the tendency of these accounts to avoid reproducing specific and controversial Russian talking points, as evidenced by the Twitter data on key phrases used by China in the year following the invasion. Although Chinese state-affiliated Twitter accounts have occasionally used the phrase ‘special military
operation,’ it has appeared twice as frequently as ‘Ukraine war’ in their tweets. Nevertheless, when referring to the war, the Chinese diplomatic accounts tend to use affixes such as ‘crisis’, ‘issue’, and ‘conflict’, which appear far more frequently than both ‘Ukraine war’ and ‘special military operation’. (see Figure 3)

![Compare Key Phrases](image)

Fig 3. A comparison of Chinese discursive practices to describe the Ukraine war.

The data thus suggest that Chinese accounts are not reproducing some of the talking points from the Kremlin, such as describing the war as a ‘special military operation’. It can be interpreted as signaling to Western powers that China seeks to remain neutral in the conflict. However, by refraining from explicitly calling it a war, China is conveying tacit support for Russia’s claim that Ukraine is part of Russia’s sphere of influence. This contrasts with China’s official position that “the territorial integrity of all countries should be respected and protected” (FMPRC, 2022). The implications are significant as they reveal China’s perception of Ukraine as part of Russia’s sphere of influence. This finding reveals how China regards the role of great powers in the international system and their perceived entitlement to influence
spheres. In terms of international security, this could have potential implications for how China may behave in future great power tensions with the US, particularly over Taiwan.

5.2.2. Ukraine: a Nazi State

One of the most prominent narratives used by the Kremlin to justify the war during the initial phase was the need to denazify Ukraine. The Twitter data demonstrate that China has not adopted the narrative on an extensive scale and thus has yet to give the Kremlin a justification for war publicly. It is revealing as the Russians and Chinese announced a no-limit partnership three weeks before the war to solidify Sino-Russo relations (Kim, 2023). Therefore, the narrative of Ukrainian neo-Nazi groups responsible for the conflict is useful to expose to what extent China is willing to align with Russian disinformation, as the narrative does not reflect the broader Chinese strategic aim to reshape the current balance of power in the international system. Moreover, the lack of prominence of the de-Nazification narrative in Chinese messaging before the conflict further reinforces the inference’s reliability, as any mentions of the narrative post-invasion would indicate a level of coordination between the two countries after the invasion.

The analysis of Twitter data from the year before the invasion (February 24th, 2021 - February 24th, 2022) revealed 233 references\(^\text{10}\) to Nazi*, with the majority of tweets referring to historical events surrounding World War II. However, tweets containing Nazi* in conjunction with Ukr*, and thus a direct connection between Nazism or neo-Nazism and Ukraine, were only found in four tweets within the dataset\(^\text{11}\). In contrast, during the first year of the renewed conflict (February 24th, 2022 - February 24th, 2023), this number increased to 117\(^\text{12}\). The rise from 4 tweets to 117 is a 2825 % increase, which would indicate that the Chinese diplomatic accounts on Twitter did adopt the narrative.

However, the data shows that out of the 117 tweets, 8 were original tweets, and 108 were retweets and one was a quote tweet. The Russian diplomatic account tweeted the same

\(^{10}\text{ASD tracker}\)

\(^{11}\text{ASD Tracker}\)

\(^{12}\text{ASD Tracker}\)
keywords 1,949 times during the timeframe, suggesting that a broader Chinese strategy for coordinating this narrative has not been facilitated. Instead, the data suggest that a smaller fraction of more hardline accounts, the so-called ‘wolf warrior diplomats’, have picked up the narrative and retweeted it, further suggesting that the Chinese are coordinating their influence efforts internally. An inference is that China is purposely distancing from Russia’s actions in Ukraine overtly to create an impression that China is neutral in the conflict while at the same time demonstrating that they support Russian interests and behavior by utilizing mid-level diplomatic accounts to retweet the narrative, thus signaling the value they see in having Russia as a partner in their long-term aim to reshape the balance of power. Furthermore, these results suggest that China may be developing a strategy of internal division of labor to create ambiguity in its messaging in order to maintain plausible deniability for any controversial disinformation. By using mid-level hardline accounts to push narratives that could have real geopolitical consequences if disseminated on the level of the FMPRC, as well as using a passive voice through retweets instead of originating the disinformation, China can effectively format its disinformation in a way that appears neutral in the war while still supporting Russia’s perspectives.

The absence of the Ukrainian neo-Nazi narrative in the broader Chinese Twitter-sphere, but promoted by specific accounts, is revealing as it implies that the Sino-Russo relationship is not limitless but conditioned by self-interest. This result is theoretically significant as it indicates that China’s information warfare in the Ukraine conflict is not entirely coordinated with Russia. It reflects China’s efforts to learn and adapt effective narrative strategies that Russia employs to suit its strategic environment. Therefore, China is not just imitating Russian information warfare based on shared cultural or national characteristics but rather learning from them to achieve its own interests.

5.2.3. Nord Stream

Another narrative from Russia that the Chinese Twitter-sphere has amplified involves obscuring the origin of the Nord Stream explosions. As previously mentioned, the Russian
disinformation system has utilized these explosions to undermine the US and sow divisions within the transatlantic alliance. China’s role in the events is more nuanced given that Western media have mainly attributed the incident to Russia without considering China as a potential actor. Thus, China’s use of the event in their information warfare reveals how Beijing positions itself between Russia and the US.

Further analysis of hashtag usage on Twitter indicates that the Russian disinformation ecosystem on Twitter has tweeted about the Nord Stream explosions three times as frequently as Chinese accounts between February 2022 and February 2023. This indicates that the Russian Twitter-sphere has more incentive to tweet about the Nord Stream explosion as it coincides with the immediate Russian war aims that seek to sow division in Western unity and undermine Western support for the Ukrainian cause.

Meanwhile, the Chinese influence efforts have primarily mirrored the Russian narrative that blames the US for the explosions. The diplomatic accounts of both countries show a strong correlation in frequency and timing, which further indicates that the Chinese response can be linked to Russian tweets. The accounts have almost equal tweets and retweets from Russia and China, with 292 and 254 tweets during the first year post-invasion, implying that Beijing is possibly using the Nord Stream explosions to align itself with Moscow and build a stronger alliance against the US.

An interesting finding from the qualitative Twitter data is that China is most likely using the Nord Stream narrative as part of a long-term strategy to undermine US hegemony by seeking support from countries in the global south for an alternative world order. It is particularly evident as Chinese embassy accounts in the global south are among the top retweeted accounts in the top 50 most engaged tweets. This notion is also evident in the discourse with tweets calling for an impartial and objective investigation from the UN, implicitly challenging the legitimacy of the US as a global arbiter of justice. Accordingly, this suggests that China uses the Nord Stream explosions to criticize the US to advance its revisionist ambitions. For example, as @CGMeifangZhang twitted:” China calls for objective

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14 The ASD Dashboard reveals that Chinese accounts have used the hashtag ”Nord Stream” 448 times and Russia 1,378 times during February 24, 2022 to February 24, 2023. (https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/)

15 ASD Tracker
probe on Nord Stream blasts, suggests UN to play active role -enapp.globaltimes.cn/article/1286018 https://t.co/o2YkXmx1iK” and in the tweet by @ChnConsul_osaka:

Wang Wenbin, spokesman for the Nord Stream bombing: The Chinese side considers it necessary to conduct an objective and impartial and professional investigation into this incident and pursue its responsibility, and supports the acceleration of the investigation process. The United Nations, the most authoritative and representative international organization, can play an active and constructive role in the development of international investigations. https://t.co/qsczfVaDdi

Based on the available quantitative and qualitative data, it thus appears that Beijing is capitalizing on the Nord Stream explosions to strengthen its ties with Moscow and garner support for China’s revisionist aspirations among countries in the global south. In doing so, China seeks to strengthen its position in the international system at the expense of the US.

5.2.4. Biolabs in Ukraine

A similar talking point from Kremlin that has been widely supported by Chinese accounts in the Twitter domain is the narrative that the US has placed multiple biolabs and bio weapons in Ukraine. The keywords Bio* + lab* in conjunction with Ukr* have been tweeted by Chinese accounts 438 times\(^\text{16}\) between February 24th, 2022, and February 24th, 2023, while Bio* + lab* has been tweeted 809 times\(^\text{17}\) during the same period. The data thus illustrate that Chinese accounts specifically linked biolabs to Ukraine in more than half of the times they tweeted about biolabs. This, in turn, suggest that the Chinese influence effort has promoted Kremlin’s narrative to some extent. However, the effort by the Chinese accounts to amplify the Russian narrative rests on previous influence efforts by Beijing to obscure the origin of Covid-19 by claiming that US labs were behind the disease (Alliance for Securing

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\(^{16}\text{ASD Tracker}\)

\(^{17}\text{ASD tracker}\)
Democracy, 2023). Consequently, a possible reason for Beijing to reproduce Moscow’s messaging could be that the US possessing bioweapons in Ukraine aligns with the earlier narrative about the origins of Covid-19, thus resulting in a mutually reinforcing and synergistic effect. However, the data demonstrate that China discursively positions the biolabs in Ukraine in half of their tweets, indicating that China is adopting a specific Russian narrative that seeks to legitimize the war. China is thus giving Russia some rhetorical cover for the aggression in Ukraine through their influence operations on Twitter.

The dynamic is revealing as it indicates that China is not just a passive supporter of Russia’s actions in Ukraine but actively promoting a specific Russian narrative about biolabs in Ukraine. It suggests that China is not simply imitating Russian influence efforts but actively seeking to capitalize on Russian narratives in shaping the information environment to advance their shared interests. By amplifying the Russian narrative, China is helping to legitimate Russian aggression in Ukraine while also advancing its strategic interests by diverting attention away from its domestic issues and onto the alleged actions of the US in Ukraine. Thus, this indicates that China’s support for the biolab narrative is part of a broader information warfare strategy that seeks to manipulate the global discourse to further China’s strategic goals.

5.3. Discussion: Convergence of Chinese and Russian Disinformation

As the results demonstrate, Chinese content in the influence operations related to the Ukraine war does not precisely replicate Kremlin narratives. Instead, China uses the conflict as a springboard to amplify parts of narratives that support its long-term strategic goals, with convergence mainly appearing in areas beneficial to each state. One example of this convergence is China and Russia’s exploitation of the narrative that blames NATO for the war, which aligns with the broader aim of reshaping the distribution of power in the system. By pointing out past US behavior, China and Russia seek to capitalize on the widespread distrust and disillusionment with the current global system to further their strategic objectives. While Russian and Chinese operations may advance this narrative based on self-interest,
China is emulating an established practice by Russia, indicating a policy transfer of information warfare from Russia to China.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that the NATO narrative strongly aligns with the overarching revisionist aims of both states. Thus, drawing conclusions about China’s relationship with Russia based on this convergence alone is inconclusive, despite the strong convergence of the narrative. It is likely that China emulates narratives and talking points from the Russian propaganda machine but does not necessarily consider the Sino-Russo relationship to extend beyond shared strategic objectives.

On the other hand, the narratives surrounding biolabs and Nord Stream demonstrate interesting similarities between Chinese and Russian influence operations regarding convergence and synergy. Both countries leverage these narratives to advance their strategic interests and challenge the US. For example, Russia is using the Nord Stream narrative to undermine Western support for the Ukraine war effort by blaming the US for the energy crisis in the EU, thus diverting attention from its actions in Ukraine. Similarly, China employs the narrative to support its long-term strategy of challenging US hegemony as well as further aligning itself with Moscow. As a result, China is emulating Russia’s use of this narrative, leading to synergetic effects that undermine international security.

The biolabs narrative illustrates a high degree of convergence between China and Russia. Both countries seem to be promoting the notion that the US is responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic and using bioweapons in Ukraine. Despite China’s broader aim to decouple Covid-19 origins from itself, the fact that it is explicitly linking biolabs to Ukraine and thus promoting a specific Russian narrative suggests a deliberate decision to align with Moscow’s influence efforts. It indicates a willingness by China to emulate Russian practices, even if it is not strictly necessary for advancing its strategic objectives. In turn, Russia seems to be emulating the Chinese narrative on previous Covid-19 disinformation, indicating a reciprocal policy transfer of information warfare between the two countries.

The results further reveal that China has utilized diplomatic ‘wolf warrior’ accounts to reproduce certain talking points from the Kremlin that do not directly align with China’s long-term strategy, such as the narrative that portrays Ukraine as a Nazi state. It may indicate that the relationship between the two countries expands beyond a strategic partnership based on shared strategic aims. It may even suggest some coordination between the influence
efforts. However, since the narrative linking Nazism to Ukraine has only been reproduced by selected accounts, it cannot be considered indicative of a widespread alignment from China. While most of the reproduced narratives serve the broader strategic aim of undermining US and Western hegemony, the narratives reproduced by China also seek to provide rhetorical cover for Russia in the conflict with Ukraine. This dynamic suggests that China is not merely imitating Russian influence efforts but actively seeking to capitalize on Russian narratives to shape the information environment in ways that advance their shared interests. Therefore, it indicates a disinformation nexus that extends beyond shared strategic aims and a ’marriage of convenience’ (Lubina (2017) that produces synergetic effects that undermine international security.

Overall, while there are similarities and differences in the aims and strategies of the influence operations pursued by Russia and China, their convergence tends to occur mainly in areas that are beneficial to each state. When characterizing the influence efforts of the Russia-China nexus, their broader strategic objectives are shared, but their immediate goals differ. Russia aims to legitimize its war efforts, while China seeks to capitalize on Russia’s weakened position to further its own strategic goals. Nevertheless, when their objectives align, their combined efforts most likely produce synergistic effects that undermine the international security order.
6. Conclusion

This thesis has set out to examine in what ways the information warfare efforts of Russia and China converge in the context of the Ukrainian war and what the implications of these dynamics are for international security. To do so, the thesis has unpacked and examined the Russian and Chinese disinformation nexus on Twitter during the first year post the invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022. The study has investigated the influence operations with an emphasis on identifying their commonalities and differences, as well as the ways in which they engage in policy transfer of their information warfare practices.

The study has shown that while the shared objectives to undermine US hegemony creates opportunities for synergistic effects, the individual aims and objectives of each state are the main drivers of converging disinformation. While there are similarities in the aims and strategies pursued by Russia and China in their information warfare practices, the convergence tends to occur mainly in areas that are beneficial to each part. The second major finding is that the convergence process was mainly instigated by China’s partial adoption of certain features of Russian influence operations. However, there is some evidence suggesting that Russia, in some instances, are being opportunistic in its approach, such as reformatting previous Chinese Covid-19 disinformation to fit its strategic aims, which suggests that Russia and China engage in a reciprocal policy transfer of information warfare.

One of the more interesting findings to emerge from this study is that China seeks to appear neutral in the Ukraine war, despite the declared no-limit partnership with Russia. To achieve this goal, China formats its influence operations in the Ukraine war in a way that allows it to maintain relationships with both the West and Russia. This is achieved by utilizing a strategy that comprises different actors on different levels within the PRC for its external messaging. Rather than publicly endorse Russian aggression in Ukraine, China employs wolf warrior diplomats to support Russian narratives, such as linking Ukrainian neo-Nazi groups to the conflict.
By reproducing narratives on a small scale through aggressive wolf warrior accounts, China is signaling the importance China places on having Russia as a partner in its long-term objective of reshaping the international system. Additionally, when reproducing disinformation not aligning with broader strategic aims, China appears to retweet disinformation instead of tweeting it directly. These tactics together enable China to remain publicly neutral while still supporting Russia, as they provide a veil of ambiguity and plausible deniability.

The implications of these dynamics on international security are multifaceted. The analysis highlights that there are some nuances between the two countries in their shared strategic goal of undermining US hegemony and promoting an alternative world order based on authoritarian principles. The results suggest that Russia’s objective with its information warfare is to construct a justification for the war and undermine Western support for Ukraine. Conversely, China seems to utilize the Ukraine conflict to strengthen its ties to Russia and to build support in the global south for its alternative world order.

The results that indicate that China supports Russia through mid-level diplomatic accounts, but not publicly endorsing Russia’s war effort despite their no-limit partnership, have significant implications for international security. The result highlights how China uses the Ukraine conflict to navigate its complex relationship with Western powers, particularly with the USA. By refraining from publicly endorsing Russian aggression in Ukraine, China is likely seeking to avoid economic sanctions and preserve relations with Western countries. In this way, by not openly supporting Russia, China positions itself as a neutral party and can potentially act as an intermediary in the conflict to further demonstrate its relevance and role as a rising global power. In doing so, China presents an alternative to the current US-led world order, highlighting its growing global influence and ambition to shape the international system. Moreover, as the analysis has demonstrated, China is using mid-level channels to lend rhetorical support for Russia’s actions in Ukraine and thus potentially prolonging the conflict, which can be interpreted to be motivated by a strategic ambition of diverting US attention away from itself and towards European security affairs. By reproducing some of the more controversial narratives on a small scale through aggressive wolf warrior accounts, China is signaling the importance China places on having Russia as a partner in its long-term objective of reshaping the international system. This, in turn, reveals the challenge China face in balancing its strategic interests with the complexities of its relationship with Russia.
The principal theoretical implication of these findings indicates that China’s information warfare in the Ukraine conflict is not fully coordinated with Russia but rather based on the notion that China emulates Russian disinformation to understand effective narrative strategies and adapt them to its strategic environment. Thus, the absence of certain narratives in the broader Chinese Twitter-sphere, but promoted by specific accounts, is revealing as it implies that the Sino-Russo relationship is not limitless but conditioned by self-interest. Therefore, China is not just imitating Russian information warfare based on shared cultural or national characteristics but rather learning from Russia to achieve its interests. Furthermore, the findings thus suggest that states engage in a reciprocal policy transfer of information warfare and are likely to increasingly rely on the practice to achieve their strategic interests in the future, such as altering the balance of power in the international system.

Taken together, these findings offer insights into the complex relationship between Russia and China in the information domain. By examining the nuances of the objectives and narratives of the influence efforts and linking the influence operations’ system-driven incentives with the practice on an actor level, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the Russian and Chinese disinformation nexus and how it undermines international security. Additionally, the findings have gained insights into the complex evolving ‘no-limit’ partnership developing between Russia and China and have helped to unpack the type of relationship that characterizes their use of information warfare in the Ukraine war. These insights are valuable for policymakers seeking to address the challenges posed by Chinese and Russian influence operations.
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