

Narrating spheres of influence
An analysis of Russian and Chinese strategic narratives

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Abstract

This thesis compares the projection of strategic narratives in Chinese and Russian state media narratives in their pursuit of spheres of influence. Previous research about spheres of influence have sought to explain why and how spheres of influence are maintained and under what circumstances one's sphere is accepted or rejected by external great powers. Arguing that China and Russia seek power projection through various means, the aim of this thesis is to broaden the constructivist understanding of how spheres of influence are pursued by authoritarian states. This is done by bridging the concept of spheres of influence with research on strategic narratives, accounting for the communicative power used by Russia and China to legitimize each other's spheres. Using a framework inspired by Somers (1994), news articles published by Chinese Global Times in 2014 and 2022 and by Russian Sputnik and RT in 2020-2022 are analyzed. The study found that Chinese and Russian state media project narratives that might strengthen each other's and, by extension, their own sphere of influence. This is primarily done by narrating a new international order and by deploying antagonistic narratives.

Key words: Sphere of influence, strategic narratives, China, Russia, narrative analysis

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and research problem

In the decades following the Cold War, the United States was seen as the sole superpower in a world order perceived as unipolar. Recent discussions over a shift in world politics have caused for renewed attention to power transition and great power relations. It is commonly argued that we enter a period of multipolar order, where different states compete for influence. Different terminology is used to describe states that are challenging US domination in the international system. ‘Rising powers’, ‘emerging powers’ and ‘BRICS’, are all labels within the academic debate about the changing world order (Ikenberry, 2011; Mearsheimer, 2019; Salzman, 2019). Although these labels use different constellations, China and Russia are often the constant actors, challenging US unipolarity.

Throughout the 2000s, China and Russia have continuously strengthened their relationship through different partnerships stretching over several sectors. Their leadership have stated that Russia and China “...Endeavor to enhance relations between the two countries to a completely new level...” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2001) and that their friendship “has no limits” (Russian Government, 4 February 2022). Some are bewildered by this relationship. Others argue that Sino-Russian relations are the product of short-term and practical commitments to counter the US-led international order (Bolt 2014, p. 48), a form of balancing strategy that will eventually erode.

Also, activities that by some seemed outdated under a unipolar world order has gained attention. ‘Spheres of influence’ has been used as a concept to study the ways powerful states intervene in the affairs of others by control and exclusion (Keal, 1983). Both Russia and China have been seen to exert spheres of influence, seeking control and exclusion over other states. Existing literature have different outlooks on why and how this control and exclusion is maintained. Also, the rationales for external great powers to align or contest another great power’s sphere is not commonly agreed upon (Jackson, 2019). Like the general debate surrounding the changing world order, the study of spheres of influence has largely been shaped by realist assumptions, where relative material capabilities accounts for changes within the international

structure. This approach has been challenged by constructivist, arguing for the non-material ways in which power can be projected.

In recent years, academics and practitioners alike have turned their attention to the ways in which strategic narratives are used by states to shape the behavior and perceptions of international actors. Analyzing power from a communicative approach, Miskimmon, et al. (2018a) divide the process of strategic narratives into *formation*, *projection* and *reception*. As such, narratives can be analyzed at certain stage in its communicative process. Analyzing a strategic narrative at its *formation* addresses the role of political actors in constructing narratives and through which institutions and procedures that narratives are agreed upon. *Projection* addresses how narratives are narrated, contested and spread. Reception addresses the reach of narratives and how people understand and process the narrative (2018a, p. 9).

Spheres of influence is an interesting term, since its connotations have changed over time. Some argue that great powers must work in concert, like the European states in the 1800s, to accept each other's spheres of influence. However, states avoid using the term in regard to their own activities. This thesis argues that, as a conceptual phenomenon, spheres of influence are still pursued. The negative connotation attached to spheres of influence have led states to pursue spheres of influence in a more covert manner, projecting strategic narratives. By legitimizing the sphere of influence of the Other, the perception of one's own sphere might be more accepted in the long-term.

The use of communication technology in international politics has increased in the last decades and is used in many ways, not least to project strategic narratives. In authoritarian states, the government is to a large extent in control of both the formation and projection of strategic narratives, as freedom of the press and freedom of speech is infringed upon. Russia explicitly makes use of state-sponsored broadcasting companies as a vehicle to strengthen Russian national interests in the information sphere (Russian Government, 2000). The importance of information as a tool in modern conflict has been further emphasized in the Military Doctrine (Russian Government, 2014) and the National Security Strategy (Russian Government, 2015). Along this development, Chinese media has been accused of re-publishing Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine (McCarthy, 2022).

Studies have showed how great powers use strategic narratives to reshape the world order (Miskimmon et al., 2013) and how antagonistic narratives are projected to destabilize other

states from within (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2019; Hoyle et al. 2021). Yet, no systematic research has engaged with great powers' projection of strategic narratives about the spheres of influence pursued by other great powers. Being two authoritarian states, where news media is highly controlled by the respective governments, studying their use of media to project strategic narratives about each other's sphere of influence for their own gain is warranted. Strategic narratives and spheres of influence both have contributed to our understanding of great power politics. Although not conceptually related, they have potential to inform each other theoretically and empirically.

1.2 Aim and research question

While spheres of influence as a concept have been studied extensively, the formation and maintenance of such spheres has yet to account for the power of narratives. Likewise, the relatively novel concept of strategic narratives would benefit from empirical application and exploration of different areas of use. This thesis is dedicated to further the understanding the pursuit of spheres of influence by great powers. The aim of this thesis is to analyze great power's use of strategic narratives in order to explore how these weaken or strengthen each other's sphere of influence. Bridging the literature on spheres of influence with the concept of strategic narratives, this thesis will analyze Russian and Chinese media narratives about each other's sphere of influence. Using an inductive mode of inquiry, this thesis sets out the following research question:

What strategic narratives are told by Russia and China about each other's spheres of influence?

Sub-questions that are explored in answering the over-arching research question are:

- *What are the main narratives and their subplots?*
- *How might Russian and Chinese strategic narratives strengthen or weaken the other's sphere of influence?*

Answering these questions, this thesis contributes to the theorization on spheres of influence by accounting for the use of strategic narratives. By comparing the strategies by two 'rising powers' that seek to reshape the world order, we can better understand their relations that goes beyond formalized treaties, propaganda or coercion. These aspects of great power politics are not insignificant but have been studied extensively. There are, as argued in this thesis, other aspects of power that needs to be accounted for.

2. Theory and previous research

The academic debate about spheres of influence has largely been dominated by realist theorization but other theoretical approaches to the concept have been made. The first section will discuss the general definition of spheres of influence, as well as argue for a constructivist approach for understanding the concept. To reconcile the spheres of influence concept with narrative power, the second section will present and discuss the concept of strategic narratives. Discussing spheres of influence and strategic narratives will open for questions about the relationship between agency and structure. Therefore, the third section will treat these questions to establish the theoretical underpinnings on this matter.

2.1 Spheres of influence

That larger states seek to influence smaller states has been evident throughout history. The term ‘sphere of influence’ first appeared in the nineteenth century when European states sought to exert their influence on distant geographical areas. The spheres took on an even larger form during the Cold War, where the United States and Soviet Union scrambled for influence in a world that would ultimately be divided between the two. After the Cold War, politicians in the West have argued that the time of ‘spheres of influence’ is over (Merkel, 2014; Obama 2016). While this perception of international relations has been the dominant standpoint among academics and politicians, some critics have argued for the existence of one sole ‘sphere of influence’, that of the United States (Allison, 2020). Being the remaining superpower after the Cold War, the US has had the opportunity to exert influence over the world, economically, socially and politically. The world order is now once again in a transformative period, where states use different strategies to adapt. The so called ‘rising powers’ are in a fierce competition to find their place in this order. This is accompanied by a competition for power and establishing ‘spheres of influence’. There is, however, cooperation between the rising powers. This thesis argues that Russia and China cooperate, besides their official treaties, to legitimize each other’s pursued sphere of influence.

While the term ‘sphere of influence’ is frequently used in political discourse, its conceptual meaning is somewhat contested. It is often understood as a hierarchical structure that results from a practice involving **control** over a given territory or polity by a foreign/outside actor, and **exclusion** of external actors from exercising that same kind of control over the same space (Jackson 2019, p. 255). However, there is no common ground on why and how this control and

exclusion occurs. Further, the logic of third parties' recognition of, or challenge to, others' sphere of influence is under debate. What determines whether an external great power align with or contest claims of control and exclusion?

A *geopolitical realist* approach argues for the material and military rationales for spheres of influence, and the geographical limitations to exert such influence. According to geopolitical realists, external great powers contest spheres of influence when they can and “*when it improves their relative security situation to do so*” (2019, p. 266).

Rational contractualism has the same outlook on the egoistic rationales for control and exclusion as geopolitical realism, while explaining its occurrence as asymmetric bargains between large and small states on a consensual basis. “[*E*]xternal great powers will challenge another power’s sphere of influence when they have the means to do so and expect the terms of another power’s asymmetric bargain adversely impact them more over time” (2019, p. 267).

Taking a *constructivist* approach, actors are seen as social rather than rational. The meaning we assign to material circumstances depend on intersubjective understandings and shared ideas about the world (2019, p. 262). Hence, the mechanisms of influence are socialization, often in the form of narration. As such, a group or state can be socialized into certain interests and behavior that are projected by external actors. External great powers’ contestation or alignment depends on their identity compatibility with the other two actors (2019, p. 269). The very notion of spheres of influence is seen as a social construction of intersubjective ideas about great powers, their rights and responsibilities, and their interests. Thus, the understandings of these concepts may shift over time and space.

The geopolitical realist and rational contractualist approaches are not entirely wrong in their assessment of rationales. China and Russia have clearly shown that they seek ‘reunification’ with territories they deem have been lost. However, geopolitical realism fails to recognize the non-material ways in which spheres of influence can be pursued and maintained. In their pursuit of spheres of influence, geopolitical, economic and social means have been used, often in conjunction with each other. Spheres of influence is mostly used by Western scholars and politicians to describe some practices in Russian and Chinese foreign policy. It may be that the prevailing geopolitical notion of spheres of influence have brought forth a conception that is too narrow. This might lead to an analytical disregard for spheres that are exercised by different means, both by other great powers such as the US, but also by Russia and China.

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has mainly focused on exercising control and exclusion throughout the former Soviet Union (Page, 1994). Some of the former Soviet republics have gradually moved in a Westward direction, joining NATO and the EU, while others have remained closely tied to Russia through CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) and other cooperative treaties. Along these contractual frameworks Russia has also, as seen in Ukraine and Georgia, been willing to use military force to exercise control and exclusion. Added to this, one cannot escape the attempts to socialize the people in their desired sphere of influence into a common identity. In the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian conflict in 2008, then President Dmitri Medvedev laid down five principles that would guide Russian foreign policy. Article IV, which treats the regional priorities of the Russian Federation, calls for “preserving and increasing common cultural and civilizational heritage that provides an important resource for the whole of the CIS...” (Russian Government, 12 January 2008). However, Russia does not explicitly use the term ‘sphere of influence. Instead, they refer to its “privileged interests”, especially in countries on the Russian border, with which they have historically special relations (Russian Government, 31 August 2008). In a similar manner, the Chinese government project their message that “people in Taiwan are of the same blood and share a common destiny [with mainland China]” (Hu, 2007). These examples of how identity can play part in maintaining a sphere of influence and goes to show that great powers seek control and exclusion by other means apart from military coercion.

Spheres of influence are often debated in the context of great power rights and responsibilities. Taking an English School approach, Benjamin Zala (2020) explores the debate about China’s rise with regards to the pursuit of a sphere of influence. The primary question in his article revolves around “whether a state can be a great power without having a sphere of influence...”, arguing that these spheres have historically been attributed great power status (p. 211).

From the discourse on China’s rise, Zala has identified three themes: an acceptance of China’s right to a sphere of influence; a rejection of China’s right to such a sphere; and the responsibility of the US and China to recognize each other’s spheres (p. 218). The arguments for accepting a Chinese sphere of influence, often proposed by realists, should not be conflicted with a call for other great powers to recognize this sphere on ethical or normative grounds. Accepting a Chinese sphere is merely an argument to ‘face the reality’ in a strategic sense (p. 220). The arguments for the US and China to recognize each other’s spheres revolves around great power management and maintaining a degree of international order. This discussion resembles the concert of Europe, where mutual recognition of spheres was the norm for European great

powers. Whether this concert agreement would be designed to merely avoid confrontation between great powers, or if it comes with special responsibilities to the rest of the international community remains unclear.

Today, both the US and China are, like Russia, rhetorically rejecting the notion of spheres of influence in principle and practice (Biden, 2009; Information Office of the State Council, 2011). However, these statements in themselves tells us little about how they, and the larger international community, understand great power rights and responsibilities. What it does tell us is that the usage the term ‘spheres of influence’, by the great powers themselves, has in the modern setting been attributed a pejorative meaning. Along the rejection of sphere of influence, China asserts territorial rights over contested territories in both the East and South China sea. This can be interpreted as an aspect of status competition with the US by seeking a ‘free hand’ in the region. In that case, there seems to be a discrepancy between the rhetoric of Chinese officials and claims of equal status with the US, who also maintain spheres of influence. From the US perspective, the Chinese revisionist strategy in the South China Sea and Western Pacific is presented as problematic, since it endangers US stronghold in the region (Pence, 2018).

The traditional use of the term, as control and exclusion of a geographical territory or polity, have been colored by the Concert of Europe and the Cold War. During these periods, mutual recognition, or tacit understanding, of each other’s sphere of influence was the norm. As the term ‘sphere of influence’ is interpreted differently today, including different forms of influence, it is appropriate to assume that the great powers have different thoughts on their legitimate rights to influence over these spheres. China and Russia rejecting US spheres of influence, and vice versa, can be seen as a discrepancy between identities which cause different understandings of the rights and responsibilities of great powers. While the formation of state identity lies beyond the purpose of this study, Russia and China share similar features that might resemble identity alignment. It is therefore appropriate to assume that Russia would accept a Chinese sphere of influence over Taiwan, and that China would accept a Russian sphere of influence over Ukraine. Seeing that the US still hold the status as world superpower, and their views on Russian and Chinese foreign policy remain dominant in world politics, Russia and China might use other methods than explicitly arguing for their own rights to spheres of influence in open debate.

Some would argue that Taiwan can never be under a Chinese ‘sphere of influence’ because they are a separatist entity that technically belongs to mainland China. Thus, China practicing control

and exclusion over Taiwan cannot be seen than something different than ruling over their sovereign territory. However, Taiwan is de facto independent and part of a larger strategic environment in the East and South China Sea where China seeks control as the exclusive great power.

Being unable to work in concert with the US to pursue their spheres of influence, adding to the negative connotations attached to the term, Russia and China are exploring other means parallel to military coercion and strategic contracts to achieve such goals. This thesis suggests that Russia and China conduct more implicit efforts in order to exercise power and gain acceptance by the international community for their spheres of influence. Hence, their use of other strategies, such as projecting strategic narratives is fruitful to this study.

2.2 Strategic narratives

The power of language lays at the core of narrative theory. Within social science, the social world itself is seen as constituted through language. We use it to tell narratives about the Self, the Other, events, and the world in a sequential manner. Language creates certain meanings by imposing a form onto an otherwise chaotic world (Wibben 2016, pp. 61-62). As these narratives produces and reproduces, they orient and reorient us, position and reposition us. This process is not only of our own making, as narratives that guides us often are created by others. Narratives are a source of information about people's sense-making processes. Narratives help us understand ourselves as political beings, which affect our behavior (Patterson & Monroe 1998, p. 316).

The concept of '*strategic narratives*' applied to international relations emerged from Freedman's (2006) study of how narratives could be projected strategically to counter military opponents. Expanding the analytical use of the concept to other areas within IR, Miskimmon et al. (2013, p. 2) define strategic narratives as "... a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors". Within the study on strategic narratives, storytelling is seen as a form of power projection and the repositioning of others are the main focus.

The new media-ecology as a global multimedia forum has gained increased importance in the study of strategic narratives and information warfare (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Szostek, 2017; Walker, 2018). Analyzing power from a communicative approach, Miskimmon et al. (2018a, p. 9) divide the process of strategic narratives into *formation*, *projection* and *reception*.

As such, narratives can be analyzed at certain stages in their communicative process. Analyzing a strategic narrative at its *formation* addresses the role of political actors in constructing narratives and through which institutions and procedures that narratives are agreed upon. *Projection* addresses how narratives are narrated, contested and spread. *Reception* addresses the reach of narratives and how the audience understand and process the narrative. In this thesis, focus lies within the projection of strategic narratives.

According to Miskimmon et al., strategic narratives come in three interconnected forms. The first is strategic narratives about the *international system*. This form tells us how a political actor conceives their understanding of international order. The second form is strategic narratives about *issues*, i.e., narratives employed that seeks to influence the development of policies. The third and last form is narratives of *identity*. When an actor can align these three forms of strategic narratives, the chance of influence increases dramatically (p. 2). External actors would be more likely to accept a sphere of influence if their strategic narratives about the international system, issues and identity aligned with their own.

Writing on antagonistic strategic narratives enabled by new information technologies, Wagnsson and Barzanje (2019) explores the destabilizing capacities of strategic narratives. Analyzing narratives projected by Russian state-controlled broadcasting company Sputnik about Sweden, the authors unmasked three key strategies in the antagonistic strategic narration: “suppression – intended to accomplish status shifts; destruction – intended to damage the other’s capabilities; and direction – intended to steer the narrative towards a preferred way of behaviour by way of implicit inducements” (p. 241). Their framework has been used in subsequent research about antagonistic strategic narratives about the Nordic countries (Deverell et al. 2021) and the Netherlands (Hoyle et al. 2021), identifying several subplots to reinforce a main narrative about each country.

The research on strategic narratives is clearly underpinned by a constructivist approach. States are seen to have different rationales for projecting strategic narratives, be that changing the world order (Miskimmon et al. 2018), promoting a certain self-image, or destabilizing Others (Wagnsson & Barzanje 2019). Despite this manifold focus, they all have the same outlook on media technologies and media consumptions patterns, making strategic narratives different from old-style propaganda. First, open sources and media are used to an increasingly higher degree in this pursuit. Further, the reach of strategic narratives is expanded through new information technology, making projection to larger but also more specific groups possible.

Lastly, the projection of narratives has become more central. The power of strategic narratives lies in their capacity to position actors and provide a map for sense-making of themselves, events and the world (Miskimmon et al. 2013; Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2019; Livingston & Nassetta, 2018).

2.3 Agency vs structure

The concept of ‘strategic’ narratives implies that a story can be told in the pursuit of strategic end-goals. Used in this sense, strategy requires agency in the form intentionality. However, as this discussion will show, the extent to which an actor can ‘create’ narratives at free will is under debate. What does it mean to be ‘intentional’? This question brings us to the discussion about agency and structure.

Between narrative scholars, there is no consensus about the primacy of agency or structure. Miskimmon et al. (2018b) refer to the diverse narrative analyses as the ‘spectrum of persuasion’ where four main positions are taken by researchers: *very thin*, *thin*, *thick*, and *very thick*. While the very thin approach is more agent centric, each step closer to the very thick approach marks a shift toward structure as the prioritized level of analysis (pp. 27-36). This thesis takes a thick position, where communication is taken to be highly reflexive and complex. This approach goes beyond the exchange of rational claims by recognizing that narrative power works through different logics, such as identity and emotional senses.

Analyzing the Sino-American struggle over meaning of COVID-19, Hagström and Gustafsson (2021) argue for the limitations of strategic narratives. According to them, the growing research on strategic narratives is too agent-centric. While not denying that actors *try* to seek influence through narratives, they are critical to their ability to gain resonance. This is because of the failure by actors to appeal to master narratives (p. 418), defined as “a dominant storyline that permeates and structures knowledge, including lower-level narratives, on a certain broad topic” (Hagström & Gustafsson 2019, p. 388). Narrative agency is constrained by institutionalized master narratives that exists domestically and internationally. In the case of Russia’s and China’s pursuit of spheres of influence, Hagström and Gustafsson’s arguments would mean that these actors must appeal to certain master narratives, like the shifting balance of power toward a multipolar order or great power rights and responsibilities, in order to change the perception of their intended audience. However, as will be discussed, analyzing strategic narratives does not necessarily entail a focus on master narratives.

Addressing the agency-structure problem, Wendt (1987) suggested that “it has its origins in two truisms about social life which underlie most social scientific inquiry” (p. 337). The first truism is that humans are purposeful actors whose actions reproduce and transform society. The second truism is the social relationships that make up the society. These relationships structure the interaction between the purposeful actors (p. 338). In his critique of contemporary “structural” explanations of state behavior, Wendt argued that neither neorealism nor world-system provide a satisfactory solution to the agency-structure problem. In international relations, neorealism defines the structure in terms of observable attributes of the member states, the distribution of capabilities. While on the surface committed to structural analysis, a neorealist explanation of the role of structure is understood in *individualist* terms. That is, the structure *constrains* the choices of pre-existing state actors. World-system theory understands structures as organizing principles of the capitalist world economy. Thus, structures are seen in *structuralist* terms, as they *generate* state actors themselves (p. 335).

Although different in their ontological presuppositions, these approaches share a common underlying notion to the agency-structure problem: the attempt to make either agents or structures primitive units that are given and unproblematic (p. 349). If, as neorealist theory suggests, structures are defined exclusively in terms of the properties of the agents constituting them, structures cannot generate agents (p. 342). Likewise, if we treat the structure as having pre-existing properties, we tend to fall into historical determinism. Thus, the world-system theory fails to explain why and how the system has developed the particular capitalist structure and the agency of states in creating the structure (p. 348).

In the light of this, Wendt proposed the structuration theory as a “relational solution to the agent-structure problem that conceptualizes agents and structures as mutually constituted or co-determined entities” (p. 350). Structuration theory provides a meta theory of analyzing the relationships of social entities. Thus, it is an attempt to provide a social ontology that solves the agent-structure problem (p. 355). Firstly, in opposition to individualists, it stresses the importance of irreducible and potentially unobservable social structures in generating agents. Secondly, in opposition to structuralists, it recognizes the need for a theory of practical reason and consciousness, accounting for the intentionality and motivation of actors. Thirdly, to overcome the primacy of one over the other, agents and structures are joined in a dialectical synthesis. Lastly, the theory argues that social structures are inseparable from spatial and temporal structures. Time and space must therefore be directly and explicitly incorporated into theoretical and practical social research (p. 356).

Wendt argued that particular research can indeed treat any of the two as primitive. But a substantive theory should be able to provide explanatory leverage on both (p. 349). Narratives have the dual purpose as both expressions of agency in forming discourse and behavior, but are also themselves constrained by discourse. As Hagström & Gustafsson (among other researchers) have shown, narrative theory is capable of providing a theory on narrative power, accounting for master narratives, and recognizing the structures that both constrain agency and generate agents. This being said, it is perfectly appropriate for a narrative theory to be agent-centric in some circumstances and to some extent. The *strategic* narrative concept looks at stories as deliberately constructed tools to achieve certain goals.

2.4 Summary

The approach taken in this thesis builds from constructivist theory. It defines a sphere of influence as a practice involving **control** over a given territory or polity by a foreign/outside actor, and **exclusion** of external actors from exercising that same kind of control over the same space. This study recognize that China and Russia are trying to reshape the world order and project power through various means at their disposal. As such, control can be manifested in different ways, through military, economic and social means. This study focus on the media ecology and the ways in which Russia and China are projecting strategic narratives about each other's sphere of influence. The approach taken in relation to the agency-structure problem is that, in this particular research on projection of strategic narratives, structure can be treated as primitive. The methodological considerations of this study will be discussed in the next chapter.

3. Methodology

This chapter focuses on the methodological considerations for the analysis. The first section argues for the selection of Russia and China as cases for analysis. In the second section, the narrative analysis as a method, and its potential implications for the findings in this thesis are discussed. The third section introduces the analytical framework for discerning the strategic narratives. Lastly, the empirical material used for analysis is discussed.

3.1 The cases of Russia and China

Bridging the gap between the ‘spheres of influence’ literature and strategic narratives, the selection of cases is based on those states seeking such spheres for different reasons. Russia and China are considered ‘rising powers’ that seek to reshape the world order. This has been suggested by previous studies (Miskimmon et al. 2018) and is stated explicitly in a joint statement by the Russian and Chinese governments (Russian Government, 2022). Furthermore, both are authoritarian state with extensive control of the media landscape. The National Security Strategy of 2015 identified “[t]he intensifying confrontation in the global information area caused by some countries’ aspiration to utilize informational and communication technologies to achieve their geopolitical objectives...” (Russian Government, 2015, § 21). This is a development that the Russian government has sought to engage in. Some of the largest newspapers are owned and controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. Media has, among other means, been used to project a Chinese self-image and promote its message internationally (Brady, 2015; Lams, 2018). It can be argued that authoritarian states are more prone to project strategic narratives that are antagonistic in nature, seeking destabilization and disruption. With the new media-ecology, Russia’s and China’s strategic narratives about each other’s sphere of influence can obtain great impact internationally.

In some instances, like in Central Asia, Chinese and Russian spheres might overlap, and their interests may come into conflict. However intriguing, analyzing the completely separate spheres of the two countries, and the interaction between them, will best fulfill the purpose of this thesis. Russia has made it its objective to incorporate Ukraine in its sphere of influence and China still consider Taiwan as being an inseparable part of mainland China. Unlike Central Asia, pursuing these spheres of influence is less likely to cause contestation from the other ‘rising power’. Seeking to shift the perception of an international audience, focusing on the sphere of influence of a similar country. The questions stated in this thesis presumes that Russia

and China are projecting strategic narratives about *each other's* sphere of influence, and the empirical analysis intends to explore these narratives.

3.2 Narrative analysis

This thesis uses an inductive mode of inference. Rather than seeking generalized explanations for a certain phenomenon, the narrative analysis in this study is dedicated to further understanding the meaning-making process in a historically, culturally and socially specific context. Ontologically, it presupposes that social reality is socially constructed through shared interpretations. Epistemologically, it sees language as a vehicle of social interaction and studying it can help us understand that social reality. Conceptually, strategic narratives treat storytelling as a form of power projection.

Discourses and narratives are closely related concepts in social theory. What sets narrative analysis apart from discourse analysis is the emphasis on the sequential ordering of events and a focus on the story. Narratives can provide insight on how people organize, process and interpret information, emphasizing human action that is directed towards a goal. By analyzing not only what is remarked on and discussed, but also what is omitted, narratives may suggest what the narrator perceives as ordinary and right. Narrative analysis requires the narrator's voice. The narrative suggests how the narrator create and make sense of their contextual surroundings (Patterson and Monroe 1998, p. 316). Narratives are about meaning making and constructing messages. Messages acquire meaning through the way in which events are unfolding in the story or how different pieces of information are put together to form a story. A narrative analysis allows the researcher to deconstruct stories, isolate their components and see how they relate to each other. By revealing the structure of narratives and how the different parts are put together, we can analyze how Russia and China create meaning and project stories in a strategic manner.

Drawing from narrative in historical scholarship, Bacon (2012, p. 780) holds that narratives “focus material into a single coherent tory, albeit with subplots”. Subplots are not alternative stories but sit within the main narrative. This thesis targets the empirical material from the notion of narratives as constituted by a main narrative built up by subplots.

In contrast to content analysis, which can be used to determine the presence of certain themes or ideas, narrative analysis makes for a deeper understanding of how the storyteller place themselves and/or others in a story and. This way, narrative analysis goes beyond a content

analysis of *what* is being said and allows for an analysis of *how* the story is told. It helps us unearth an underlying story that has not yet been made explicit. As such, there is a dual layer of interpretation in narrative analysis. First, the key actors/agents interpret the events, then the researcher interprets the construction of that narrative.

How, then, does one discern a narrative that is in itself an interpretation of certain events? First of all, perfect communication is impossible. Hearing is not the same as listening, and listening is not the same as understanding, and understanding is not the same as agreeing. Second, political actors may not know what to aim for, despite the presence of a strategy. If this is the case with Russia and China, we can yet interpret their practical communicative behavior as being part of a meaning-making process of events where they *believe* what strategy to *approximate*.

This calls for a careful and in-depth reading of the material, as well as the employment of a framework of investigative tools for structuring the analysis. Recalling the question that this study aims to answer: *What strategic narratives are told by Russia and China about each other's spheres of influence?* The next section sets out to present how a strategic narrative is discerned.

3.3 Framework and investigative tools

The general approach to the empirical material is asking what stories are being told, but also how the stories are told. The first step in the analytical process was to identify the narratives as such, discerning its thematical trends. This step was guided by asking questions like: What are the events reported and how are they depicted? Where are these events played out? Which actors are given prominence? How are these connected to create a logical sequence and narrative coherence? What positions and roles do the actors have in the plot? Who are the victims/heroes/villains/fools? How do the stories continue and change over time? What is posed as the problem, the reason for the problem, and suggested (re)solutions? Answering these questions, it was explored *what* stories are being told. The questions can be found in the Appendix.

In the next step, borrowing from Somers (1994), this study used four investigative tools for a more structured and careful reading of how the story and its parts is put together as to create an inner logic. First, the narratives' *relationality* was explored. This treats how events are sorted out and set in relation to other events. How are the different parts of the story connected?

Second, *causal emplotment* regards how the chain of events and episodes are ordered in a sequential manner. The third tool focus on *temporality* and *place*, which concerns how subplots are placed in temporal and spatial relations to each other. Fourth, *temporal appropriation* is about what events are selectively appropriated and given meaning, while omitting other events (1994, p. 616). This is sometimes referred to as the “once upon a time of a story” (Wagnsson & Barzanje 2019, p. 242). By using these tools, it was explored *how* the sequences are ordered into a story.

3.4 Material

The empirical material was composed of English-language news media outlet. In the case of Russian strategic narratives, articles published by state-controlled media companies RT and Sputnik was analyzed. The timeframe was set from 2020 to November 2022. This is where Taiwan started to appear more frequently in the media narrative, presumably as a result of heightened tensions in the region. The empirical material consists of 46 articles published by RT and Sputnik. Of these, only 2 were published in 2021, which was included. Capturing stories where Taiwan plays a prominent role, Sputnik articles was set to contain the tags ‘Taiwan’ and ‘World’ or ‘Opinion & Analysis’ or ‘Sputnik Explains’. The articles composing the Spuntik material could best be described as a mixture between day-to-day news and op-eds. As RT puts a disclaimer on their od-eds, stating that the views of the writer do not necessarily reflect the views of RT, the empirical material from RT consist of day-to-day news articles. The best way to capture RT articles on Taiwan is to use the ‘Trends’ function on their website. Articles from both RT and Sputnik were chosen where ‘Taiwan’ appeared in the title. The choice of this term was made due to its inclusive nature, capturing different kinds of topics where the Taiwan was the main topic.

Chinese news coverage about Ukraine was collected from the website of Global Times. A search was done on Global Times website with the search word “Ukraine” in the headline. The choice of this term was made due to its inclusive nature, capturing different kinds of topics where the country was at center stage. Due to the vast number of results that regular day-to-day news yielded from the search word (2788 records), the search was delimited to the ‘OP_ED’ section, which was further restricted to the ‘Editorial’, ‘Observer’ and ‘Asian review’ subsections. In a preliminary search, this yielded a total of 39 results published in 2014 and 2022 (up until October 13).

The time periods for the RT/Sputnik material deviates from that of the Global Times. This is due to the differences in frequency of reporting. The timeframe chosen for Global Times was a result of the heightened tensions between Russia and Ukraine, which caused “peaks” in the reporting. Likewise, heightened tension in the Taiwan strait caused “peaks” in the material from RT/Sputnik. However, it should be stated that the timeframe is not of essential concern of this study. While the empirical material in this study might be biased toward certain spectacular events that is deemed extra noteworthy by the authors, it might result in a more interesting and important reading of the attempts by Chinese media to influence the global audience.

Some of the articles are assumed to contribute more to the narrative than others. Editorials have the benefit of mirroring views that are sanctioned by the editorial board or publisher. Thus, they reflect the general stance of the newspaper. In cases where articles are not signed by an editorial board, as with ‘observer’ articles at Global Times, ‘opinion & analysis’ and ‘Sputnik explains’ at Sputnik, these are still considered as sanctioned views by the newspapers as a whole. In contrast to similar articles at RT, Global Times and Sputnik have no disclaimer about the authors expressing their independent views.

Analyzing newsmedia rather than official statements have several benefits. Media is the primary tool through which actors use strategic narratives to influence the perceptions of the audience (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2019). Analyzing these media outlets does not capture the voice of the respective government, but it captures state-controlled media narratives which represents the Russian and Chinese governments. Focusing on these news media companies are therefore warranted. As stated before, these outlets are used in the “information warfare” to project narratives as a part of a larger national security strategy or promote a self-image of the state. Global Times is a daily newspaper under the auspices of the Communist Party flagship newspaper, People’s Daily, commenting on international issues. In an interview with Quartz, former editor-in-chief Hu Xinjin explained the expressions of Global Times as a reflection of what party officials are actually thinking, but cannot say out loud (Huang, 2016). According to www.rt.com, “RT creates news with an edge for viewers who wants to Question More. RT covers stories overlooked by the mainstream media, provides alternative perspectives on current affairs, and acquaints international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events” (“About RT”, 2022). Sputnik is part of Rossiya Segodnya media group, owned and operated by the Russian government. Rossiya Segodnya was created by presidential decree in 2013 which the purpose of spreading news about Russian state policy abroad. Together with RT, Sputnik

constitutes the major media outlet used for projecting Russian influence abroad (Ramsay & Robertshaw 2019, p. 11).

Sanctions have been imposed on Russian state-sponsored media that suspends their broadcasting activities within the EU, affecting their television broadcasting and news website. The sanctions were imposed with direct reference to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the wider use of Russian broadcasting outlets to spread disinformation projected at EU member states (Council of the European Union 2022). Regardless of the rationales for these sanctions, the continuous analysis of Russian media outlets may serve an important purpose. It should be recognized that for the remainder of the world, these broadcasting agencies are still accessible and can be used to project strategic narratives to an international audience. Circumventing the suspension is still possible through different methods. For this study, and thus for academic purposes, this should be done with great care. Using a VPN server located outside the EU made it possible to access the empirical material directly on RT and Sputnik websites.

The questions posed in the code-scheme (see Appendix) will guide the reading of the articles, exploring and sorting out the content and different parts of the narrative. The investigative tools are then applied to analyze how the parts are connected in a sequential manner, establishing a strong and coherent narrative. The presentation of the analysis is written as an aggregated version of the interpretation of the individual narratives. The analysis of each article has been made using the code-scheme and the investigative tools derived from Somers (1994). Examples of pieces from the news material that are deemed typical, or by other means representative for the narrative, will be presented. For transparency, all articles read are listed in the reference list.

4. Analysis

Each section of the analysis will begin with a general overview of the main narrative. Subsequently, the subplots identified are presented. Every section ends with a summary with reflections on the interpretation of the narratives. First, the narrative projected by Global Times in 2014 is presented. The analysis continues by presenting the narrative projected by Global Times in 2022. Lastly, the narrative projected by RT and Spuntik 2020-2022 is presented.

4.1 Global Times 2014

Main narrative: Ukraine as the chaotic space between spheres

The main narrative continually places Ukraine in a chaotic setting, both internally and externally. As divided between the Eastern and Western spheres of influence, Ukraine is narrated in a geopolitical environment of contesting interests. This is noticeable already in coverage from the beginning of 2014 (Hong, 21 January 2014). The contest between spheres of influence is depicted as having taken irrational and irresponsible turns. Three subplots was identified: (1) ‘Ukraine’s internal split – economic, cultural and political chaos’, (2) ‘Cooperative indeterminacy, and (3) ‘Western thoughtlessness’. These will be presented further below. The subplots were all present in articles from the beginning of 2014. In some articles, several of the subplots were simultaneously present. Although the reasons for the chaos varied in the subplots, they intersect with each other and reinforces the main narrative of *‘Ukraine as the chaotic space between spheres’*.

The temporality of the main narrative displays repeated references to the end of the Cold War, marking the starting point of the *‘Ukraine as the chaotic space between spheres’* narrative. There are two parallel problems presented through the narrative. The first is the loss of Eastern Europe as a sphere by Russia to the EU and NATO. The second is Ukraine’s internal chaos that followed from its independence from the Soviet Union. Overall, Ukraine is assigned the role of a foolish child that is indeterminate in its behavior. According to the narrator, the issue of being positioned between EU and Russia must be dealt with in some way, be it striking a balance or choosing side. Because of this position, they are subjected to (Western) manipulation. Also, the internal split is presented as a problem that haunts both present and future Presidents.

Moreover, the narrative shows that the West and Ukraine have not yet understood what others have; that the interests of all stakeholders must be respected. Russia is afforded Chinese sympathies as it has been pushed into a corner by the West who faultily believes that Ukraine can and should be under their exclusive control. The Russians are not directly responsible for the situation and the deteriorating relations with Ukraine. This agency belongs partly to the US, NATO and EU. The temporal and factual appropriation of events, focusing on the Western “manipulation” of a chaotic Ukraine (Kiracofe, 16 February 2014), attributes causality to the expansion of Western spheres of influence.

In the main narrative, the closest we get to a hero is China, who is depicted as the adult in the situation. “A Beijing-based talk could be the first step for China to involve, and China is able and qualified to play the role as a mediator” (Global Times ed. 16 April 2014). While not arguing for a full Chinese neutrality, it is still considered as the responsible party who “can see the general picture and has employed a more delicate and smarter diplomacy” (ibid.).

Thus, the problem for the situation is oriented towards the past and present, as these problems continue to exist. The narrative analysis of events exposes a clear focus on the power dynamics between Russia and the West. By telling a story of new emerging world order, the solution is oriented toward the future.

Subplots

This analytical step focuses on the subplots that reinforce the main narrative. The subplots intersect with each other to various degrees and strengthen one another, often in the same piece. Although the reasons for what was reported as the chaos in Ukraine varied in the subplots, they remain consistent and compatible with the main narrative of ‘*Ukraine as a chaotic space between spheres*’.

Ukraine’s internal split – economic, cultural and political chaos

This subplot highlights the internal situation in Ukraine, which is depicted as chaotic in several respects. The narration is situated in a turbulent economic and political setting. The independence from the Soviet Union marks the starting point of its descending path. The inner conflicts in Ukraine have made the country hard to govern and vulnerable to manipulation. Being located between the East and West is presented as a situation of both advantage and

disadvantage. But because of their internal chaos, Ukraine have so far only been able to embrace the latter (Global Times ed. 28 May 2014).

Economically, Ukraine is depicted as struggling, having gas debts to Russia that they cannot and will not pay (Qian, 14 April 2014). Moreover, Ukraine is in urgent need of financial support, which the EU has been unwilling to provide. Instead, Russia is the hero in the story, providing huge loans and reducing natural gas prices (Hong, 21 January 2014). In a following article, Russia has raised the price, which it had “reason to”. The reason is not elaborated further, and the story continues by making Ukraine look stubborn, refusing to recognize the new price and unable to pay the debt to Russia’s natural gas companies (Qian, 14 April 2014).

Culturally, Ukraine is portrayed as a country with a damaged national identity and broken ethnic relations. The split is so severe that the country has almost brought itself to civil war (Global Times ed. 28 May 2014).

The situation in Ukraine is complicated. The East-West cultural and political split inside Ukraine turns on matters of ethnicity, language, and religion. The split has yet to be resolved into a broader Ukrainian identity, and so the country is subject to manipulation by internal and external forces. Some experts say that in a worst case scenario, the present crisis in Ukraine could result in civil war. Should civil war break out, Western and Russian military intervention is possible (Kiracofe, 16 February 2014).

Although subject to manipulation, Ukraine’s people and politicians bears the agency for its internal chaos. Failing to unify the country into a coherent identity, they have put themselves in a vulnerable position.

Politically, the country has been raged with protests, rigged elections and presidents faced with tough conditions. The subplot asks whether Poroshenko (President 2014-2019) will be more successful than Yanukovych (President 2010-2014) in dealing with the internal and external problems that are about to draw Ukraine into the abyss. Governing Ukraine and regaining authority are seen as Poroshenko’s most challenging tasks, not to what extent democracy can be realized (Global Times ed. 28 May 2014).

The 2004 “Orange Revolution” in protest against a rigged presidential election is a reminder of current political divisions in the country. The western part tilts

toward Europe, and the southern and eastern parts historically feel much closer to Russia. Even if the political elites are able to arrive at a compromise, the government may still be faced with choices that could lead to the division of the country (Sinha, 17 February 2014).

Overall, the subplot about Ukraine is that as long as Ukraine is economically, culturally and politically divided, the country will continue to be caught in an internal chaotic space.

Cooperative indeterminacy

In the subplot ‘Cooperative indeterminacy’, the chaos is manifested in the balance Ukraine seeks between Europe and Russia. Thus, Ukraine is narrated as chaotic in relation to its geopolitical surroundings. The articles tell a story about a country that is constantly changing “sides”, going back and forth between the EU and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). These different processes of integration and association agreements are presented as indeterminate behavior, as if Ukraine cannot make up its mind. Thus, attention is drawn to the agency, or lack thereof, of Ukrainian politicians.

On the one hand, President Viktor Yanukovich reiterated that the EU integration strategy is still the priority for his country’s diplomacy, but on the other hand, he expressed concerns that the accords go against the country’s national interests... The special geopolitical environment Ukraine is in determines that Ukraine will not escape the plight of choice any time soon (Hong, 21 January 2014).

Being located in this geopolitical environment cause for some form of action, where Ukraine has to navigate their way. Their failure to do so is the reasons why they are subject to external pressure. But putting an end to the indeterminacy does not necessarily entail choosing one side over the other. A balanced approach (ibid.) or “to strike a deal with both the West and Russia” (Sinha, 17 February 2014) are resolutions to the story of Ukraine as indeterminate. The focus lies on the perceived passiveness of the Ukrainian political leadership. The audience is told that as long as the political elite in Ukraine remains indeterminate, the country will continue to be caught in an external chaotic space. This subplot intersects with the ‘Ukraine’s internal split’ subplot, as the political, cultural and economic chaos makes it hard for Ukraine to choose side. This difficulty also denies them to take strategic and rational decisions. While the signing of a Russian \$15 billion economic bailout was argued more beneficial for Ukraine, the opposition is of another opinion (Sinha, 17 February 2014). In the narrator’s mind, the political situation

in the country is that volatile that the views of the political leadership might change in short notice, as part of negotiations, pressure or a more West-friendly president.

Apart from their position between East and West, Ukraine is also narrated as indeterminate in negotiations. The internal chaos will make it hard to be determinate at the negotiation table. Writing on upcoming “four-party talks” between the EU, Russia, Ukraine and the US, the negotiations are predicted to halt if Ukraine “continues to act ruthlessly and go to the extremes” (Global Times, 16 April 2014). But as of now, “Ukraine is stuck between the EU and Russia” (Global Times ed. 28 May 2014).

Western thoughtlessness and improper interference

The chaos that Ukraine finds itself in is not restricted to its internal split. Global Times’ subplot ‘Western thoughtlessness and improper interference’ is connected to expansion of the Western sphere of influence as a result of the general chaos that followed the Cold War.

After the Cold War, the defined borders around eastern Europe by Brussels have been changing. Especially after Poland and the Baltic states joined the EU and NATO, new European countries have been pushing east so as to expand the EU’s sphere of influence (Hong, 21 January 2014).

Connecting the expansion of EU and NATO with the current situation in Ukraine, the West is narrated as fools for thinking that Russia would not respond to this. Further in this story, we are told that the Western world are othering Russia by wooing former Soviet republics into their “democratic” system (ibid.). The fact that democratic is put in quotation marks indicates that the narrator does not approve of their system as “real” democracy, again depicting the West as fools. Ukraine is now the next in line of former Soviet republics that have become the target of EU and NATO spheres of influence.

No one should be surprised by Russia’s actions. The loss of Ukraine, Belarus and other territories at the end of the Cold War was a terrible blow to Russians. These territories had been part of Russia for centuries, and it was always likely that Moscow would try to get them back sooner or later. Nonetheless the Ukrainian crisis has come as a surprise to Europeans, and now they face hard choices... This is not what the Europeans were thinking about when 10 years ago they

thoughtlessly expanded NATO to include not just Poland but the Baltic states
(White, 17 April 2014).

The thoughtlessness of the West is further emphasized by questioning NATO's responsibilities in Ukraine (Tzogopoulos, 2 April 2014). Despite NATO expansion eastward, and the 2008 agreement which expressed Ukraine's will to join the alliance, the West is hesitant and avoids direct support to Ukraine. This way, the thoughtlessness is manifested in half-hearted strategic plans. Being heavily dependent on NATO for their security, the European members lack a framework for action in the absence of US engagement. While the US occasionally decides to cede leadership in European collective security, they are still ascribed agency for escalating the conflict in Ukraine. The narrative tells that they must stop the confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. Thus, they bear the responsibility to "get relations with major powers right" (Kiracofe, 16 February 2014). Further, this story suggest that *Washington* engage in dialogue with *Russia*. By omitting Ukraine from this dialogue, their role in this subplot is more passive than in the previous two.

Summary

Overall, the narrative projected by Global Times in 2014 focus on Ukraine and its internal and external problems. It is played out in a space of dual integration processes and chaos, where Ukraine is an indeterminate actor. The agency for this is mostly attributed to its political leadership, but also the country as a whole, lacking a coherent identity. Russia is almost completely absent in the narrative. Their only appearance is connected to the problem of NATO and EU expansion eastward, to which Russia have answered with predictable, understandable and necessary measures. The West is depicted as fools for believing that their interference in Ukraine would not have consequences.

4.2 Global Times 2022

Main narrative: The victim of a faulty US-led order

On the whole, Global Times continuously places Ukraine in a victim position in regard to the current US-led order. While the main narrative in 2014 held that the manipulation of Ukraine by the West was enabled by the internal chaos, the reason for the problems in 2022 has its starting point in the present manipulation and instigation by the US. The audience is told that

“Washington doesn’t care about Ukraine’s stability or interests. What it wants is anxiety and chaos in Kiev” (Global Times, 18 February 2022).

The main narrative of 2022 establishes spatial relations between events, connecting other regions with the situation in Ukraine, in the past, present and the future. This is partly done by connecting the ‘US instigated anxiety’ in Ukraine with statements from Taiwan authorities about the threat from China. Taiwanese officials are said to exaggerate the parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan. Yet, Global Times connects Ukraine and Taiwan by stating that the latter should learn the lesson from the former (Global Times, 13 February 2022). Taiwan should realize that provoking a war with China, under US instigation, will ultimately backfire. By referring to Zelensky’s critique of US instigation, the Ukrainian leadership is depicted in a slightly brighter light than in 2014. This adds to the shift in the presentation of Ukraine from a country in total collapse in the present to a country that faces *potential* collapse.

In January, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Washington and the media of fueling the panic amid the US repeatedly touting that Russia will soon invade Ukraine. And such panic weighed on the economy while there were “no tanks in the streets”... Taiwan authorities should learn from the current crisis in Ukraine. It will be Taiwan itself which bears the loss when the US intensively and groundlessly advertises the Chinese mainland’s “invasion” over Taiwan... The tensions in Ukraine, or even war, are in the best interests of Washington. Ukraine will suffer the biggest loss if a war breaks out, followed by Russia, and then the EU... As a result, Ukraine will be messed up (Global Times, 13 February 2022).

The problems and resolutions in the main narrative revolves around the fragility of the Western partnership and the importance of other major powers. The audience is told that other countries than Ukraine will be next of falling victim of US instigation if they are to act pawns for the US. The main narrative is characterized with a strategy that works to destroy the legitimacy of the current order, sough distrust between NATO members and their partners, and direct other states toward an ‘independent foreign policy’, meaning that they do not “blindly” follow the policies of the US.

The main narrative is built on by three subplots: (1) ‘The West as untrustworthy and contradictory’, (2) ‘US suppression and ignoring of security demands’ and (3) ‘Independent foreign policy and the importance of other major powers’. These will be further presented in the next subsection.

As in 2014, states and their respective political leaders are in focus in articles published in 2022. However, the main narrative of 2022 displays a more diverse set of actors, including the international community and non-Western major powers such as China, who was still assigned the role of the nuanced hero that stands for what is truly right, moral and rational.

The narrative draws attention to the aggressive US, or 'West', pursuing "strategic suppression". Thus, causality for regional chaos around the world is attributed to them. Interestingly, Ukraine is depicted more as a victim without agency than in 2014. In Global Times' main narrative of 2022, Ukraine is assigned a more passive role that no longer must choose side or balance between East and West. This is the task assigned to the rest of the international community. Ukraine should still, however, be constructive in negotiations and work on their internal split. But now that conflict has already broken out, the narrative tells, it is more about minimizing the negative effects. Especially, it is up to other regions to avoid being the next victim of US instigation.

In 2022, the problem presented by Global Times lies in the present or near past. US instigation of conflicts is a problem not contained to the Ukraine crisis, but also crises in the past and potentially in the future.

Washington is the root cause for many major regional crises aside from the Ukraine issue. The Korean Peninsula nuclear crisis, Iran nuclear issue, and the Afghan chaos caused by the US troops' withdraw[a]ll least year are the "hornet's nests" stirred up by the US... If Washington's ultra-strategic selfishness remains unrestrained, then even if the Ukraine crisis reaches a soft landing, the next crisis awaits (Global Times, 29 January 2022).

Here, the narrative has changed from 2014, when the problem seemed contained to Eastern Europe and Ukraine. Now the narrator signals that the stakes are higher. The Ukraine crisis is part of a larger problem. The resolution to the problem in the main narrative is found in other more constructive, moral and rational behavior, represented by China and other states that subscribe to an 'independent foreign policy'. *Independent* is depicted as going against the interests of the US.

Subplots

In the narrative projected by Global Times in 2022, three subplots can be identified. They all highlight the same problem, although taking different angles to project the message of how Ukraine have become a victim of a faulty US-led world order.

The West as untrustworthy and contradictory

The first subplot ‘The West as untrustworthy and contradictory’ tells a narrative of a divergent Western partnership, among its members, within member states, and in relation to Ukraine. The narrative attempts to reduce the attraction of Ukrainian-Western relations by depicting the view of a strong Western partnership as an illusion.

The subplot starts with two stories that draws on the divergence between American and Ukrainian rhetoric and perceptions of the situation. Playing out weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the stories depict the US as hyping up the situation by deploying 3,000 troops in eastern Europe (Global Times ed. 7 February 2022) and by referring to US intelligence agencies that fabricate false information and lies (Global Times ed. 18 February 2022). If both Ukraine and Russia agree that the US are exacerbating the tensions, the story asks, how can the US be trusted to be on their side and work for Ukraine’s interests? The answer is that they cannot. The narrator points to a contradiction in that the US “stands with Ukraine”, yet have not provided the necessary and substantial help developing their economy and easing tensions with Russia (7 February 2022).

Besides the divergence between Ukrainian and American rhetoric, the unity among NATO members looks weak and on the downfall. As the heightened tension on the Russia-Ukraine border escalated into an invasion of Ukraine, the rhetoric may have converged, lending for a shift in the subplot. From March 2022, two new themes appeared in the subplot. Focus was on internal divergence, both domestically in the US and between NATO members. Countering theories of “China’s special responsibility in solving the conflict, Global Times refers to the domestic US frictions over the Ukraine conflict. Citing former congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, an easy resolution is presented. Biden could guarantee that Ukraine will not join NATO (Global Times ed. 1 March 2022). This way, the ‘special responsibility’ is forwarded to the US and the Biden administration.

Dealing with falling approval ratings for Biden’s handling of the conflict, one story adds a split between the administration and US public to the narrative (Global Times, 30 March 2022). In

the same piece, referencing Biden's supposed support of regime change in Russia, the divergent West is exemplified by stating that "...the leaders or senior officials of US allies, including the UK and France, have also attempted to make a clean break with Biden's statements". Taking these stories together, the agency belongs to the US political elite, which is not restricted to the Biden administration. First and foremost, the problem is presented as political selfishness, greed and US instigation. Even though the other NATO members are of a slightly different kind, the US is the leader of the Western alliance. The internal divergence makes for a weak, untrustworthy and contradictory partnership. Continuing to narrate US allies as dissatisfied (Global Times, 14 April 2022) and uncommitted, 'The West as untrustworthy and contradictory' further seek to dismantle the strength of the Western partnership as illusory. Zelensky's message that Ukraine can fight Russia for 10 years is followed up by Global Times by putting Europe's dedication into dispute.

He [Zelensky] might want to convey the message that Ukraine can hold on. Yet there is one big question: Will Europe keep it company?... is Europe prepared to see a 10-year conflict on its own continent? Imagine what would happen to Europe: It would turn into a bleeding decade... the EU's forthcoming sanctions on Russia, also the sixth round of sanctions, will target banks... as well as Russian oil. Europe already lacks oil and gas. If it implements the plan, Europe will hurt itself more, and European countries will be further divided (Global Times, 18 April 2022).

Not only are the West denying Ukraine the actual help they need, which is economic development. They are also denying them membership in NATO (Global Times, 12 October 2022). Thus, Ukraine have been misled by statements from the West claiming to support them. Being an ally of the West is not only an illusion, but a false promise of a strong partnership to which Ukraine does not belong. In sum, the lessons proposed by the narrative are that the West is not as coherent and strong as they present themselves. Adding to this, Ukraine is not as close of an ally as they might think.

US suppression and ignoring of security demands

The second subplot identified was 'US suppression and ignoring of security demands', where the problem of US instigation is emphasized. Not only are the West divided and untrustworthy. The US deliberately instigate conflicts for their own gain, of which Ukraine have become a victim.

In this subplot, the actors of focus are China, Russia and the US. The US expecting China to “persuade” Russia out of Ukraine is seen as a way to renounce responsibility, both for the conflict as such and the resolution for the conflict. While doing this, they are narrated as carrying out “strategic suppression”, making them villains that hope to take the benefits of chaos and regional conflicts. This behavior is linked both in regard to Ukraine, but also in the Asia-Pacific region. The US instigation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine are taken to a new level, as it is described as a problem overarching world politics in general (Global Times, 29 January 2022). Connecting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with the conflict in Ukraine, one story establishes a relationship between US instigation and NATO’s quest to legitimize its existence (Global Times ed. 7 February 2022). By continuously ignoring the security demands of others, NATO have pushed Russia into a corner (Global Times, 13 February 2022).

It should be noted that it is very regrettable that the Ukrainian issue has evolved so far. The US has continued its intensive containment of Russia, which finally forced Russia to try to realize its security demands in such a way. This is the outburst of the dissatisfaction of the party whose security demands have been ignored for a long time since the end of the Cold War (Global Times ed. 23 February 2022).

NATO expansion eastward, under US leadership, is repeated as the root cause for the conflict in Ukraine (Global Times ed. 1 March 2022). This kind of temporal appropriation marks the beginning of the narrative. With the US continuing to sell arms to Ukraine, they are turning the crisis into a proxy war. While Ukraine seems ready for peace talks, laying out their demands, the US is depicted as standing on the side as they seek a prolonged war. The narrator has it that the US is conducting a strategy of containment against Russia (Global Times, 9 May 2022). One piece goes to great lengths in legitimizing Russia’s military conflict in Ukraine. While doing so, it also establishes a connection between supposed US instigation of Taiwan. This way, the story implicitly legitimizes similar response from China.

Is it unprovoked? The escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is mainly due to the eastward expansion of NATO led by the US, which has squeezed Russia’s strategic space, and the US had repeatedly incited Ukraine to confront Russia, eventually triggering a strong reaction from Russia. In terms of the Taiwan straits, the US has also repeatedly instigated the secessionist forces in the island to provoke the

Chinese mainland by practices such as upgrading arms sales to Taiwan island (Global Times, 16 March 2022).

One story about the US lend-lease act, sought to expedite the process of sending military aid to Ukraine, contrasts Putin, who's speech on Victory Day "avoided inflammatory remarks", and the Biden administration, who "made no secret of its intention to fan the flames and prolong the conflict (Global Times, 10 May 2022). Through this factual selection, Biden and the US military complex is described as greedy, selfish and aggressive while Putin is depicted as sane, compassionate and negotiable.

Not only should countries fear that NATO and the US are unreliable and contradictory partners that won't serve your interests. The West, which the US is part of, is no longer the thoughtless fools as in the narrative of 2014. They will actively use you in order to achieve their own goals in a vicious manner.

Independent foreign policy and the importance of other major powers

This subplot provides the audience with a supposed explanation to why the current order is faulty. In 'Independent foreign policy and the importance of other major powers', it is because the US have enjoyed unipolar judgement in foreign affairs and conflicts. As of now, judgement of the Russia-Ukraine conflict lies in the hands of the West but should be transferred to the international community (Global Times ed. 1 March 2022).

The narrative tells a story of what it means to be a *real* major power, a concept that the US has gotten completely wrong. It is not about the ability to realize its own interests, but responsibility and ability to cooperate and safeguard international peace. The Russia-China joint statement of a new world order is presented as a wakeup call for the US.

Washington still intends to impair other countries and maintain its hegemony by instigating wars. This is a staggering geopolitical daydream. To wake up from such a pipe dream, the bunch of political elites in Washington should carefully read this joint statement and understand how to make the US conform to the trend of the times and become a truly responsible power (Global Times ed. 7 February 2022).

Narrating the US as weak and lacking a majority in the international community, the audience is told that the US has neither the strength nor the backing to sustain global order. The US must understand it is no longer the one that can dictate to other countries and define the world order

(Global Times, 6 June 2022). This is contrasted against the role played by China. The two countries have two completely different logics on international issues: “China has always decided its position and policy based on the merits of the matter itself” (Global Times, 22 March 2022). While the US seeks chaos, China seeks peaceful solutions and has never kidnapped the collective interests of the region for its own interests (Global Times, 29 January 2022). For their peaceful and neutral stance, China have received recognition by both Russia and Ukraine.

China has always stood for respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, attaching importance to the legitimate security concerns of all countries, supporting all efforts conducive to the peaceful resolution of the crisis, and committing itself to promoting peace talks to ease the humanitarian situation. China consistently opposes unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdictions that have no mandate from the UN Security Council. Both the Russian and Ukrainian sides expressed appreciation for China’s objective and impartial position on the Ukraine issue (Global Times ed. 14 September 2022).

These two stories, one critiquing the leader of the faulty order and the other presenting the reader with an alternative, are intertwined as they can be seen as attempts to create a new international order.

One article, covering the Nord Stream leaks, starts out by emphasizing the need for a joint investigation by international bodies. At this point, the story has a distant and nuanced tone concerning the perpetrator, stating that “No one claimed responsibility. There have been various speculations on international social media, but all have no credible evidence” (Global Times ed. 29 September 2022). But as the article continues, fingers are starting to point towards the US and its suspiciously negative stance towards the Nord Stream pipelines from the very beginning. This way, proposing the US as the problem, and the international community as the solution, the narrative presents further meaning as to why the unipolar judgement of the US has to come to an end.

As Japan stands on the side of the West on the Ukraine issue, Global Times is depicting their foreign policy as limited to that of the US. Pointing to India’s more reluctant stance on the matter, refusing to fully condemn the invasion, their position is described as independent and

rational (Global Times, 10 March 2022). This way, an “independent” foreign policy is attributed to those who dare to stand up to the US.

Summary

In 2022, the narrative projected by Global Times have shifted their focus, putting more emphasis on the US as a villain. Ukraine is now a more passive actor, being the next victim in a historical sequence of US instigation of conflicts. The reader is told that there has been and will be more victims of the US-led order if countries should fail to follow an “independent foreign policy”. By exemplifying India’s reluctance to fully condemn the invasion of Ukraine, they are implicitly regarded as independent in their foreign policy. China is presented as the alternative to this order, by narrating it as nuanced, fair and objective.

Further, by depicting the Western partnerships and alliances as untrustworthy and contradictory, the narrator seeks to destabilize the Ukrainian-Western relations and direct Ukraine away from the West. The lesson of the narrative is that Ukraine has been misled by the illusion of the West as a strong and reliable partner.

4.3 RT and Sputnik 2020-2022

Main narrative: Rocking the boat

The main narrative revolves around the competition between the US and China over Taiwan. Taking departure in the formation of Taiwan in 1949, following from the civil war, the narrative tells the story of how relations between the two Chinas quickly stabilized. Informal relations were established between then ruling party in Taiwan, KMT, and Beijing. The temporality displays repeated references to a historical status quo. Even though the US and Taiwan have had close relations since the island’s de facto independence, status quo have not been challenged in a serious way until now. In a pejorative manner, Taiwan is described as secessionists who, together with the US, are aggressively violating Chinese sovereignty. The presidency of Tsai Ing-wen and her party, DPP, has taken advantage of US-China tensions in their pro-interdependence struggle. At the same time, the US are using Taiwan as a proxy for strategic suppression in the East and South China Sea. Thus, the main narrative ascribes Taiwan different roles at different times, ranging from being a victim that has been misled or used by the US to being assigned the role of a secessionist provocateur. Particularly, the Tsai Ing-wen administration is assigned agency for a deteriorated foreign policy based on a vicious pro-

independence stance. In the Russian narrative, the US is selectively portrayed as an instigator seeking conflict or a confused country that performs diverging agendas, stemming from a decentralized authority. Both these features are contributing to strengthen the main narrative of ‘Rocking the boat’. China is sympathized with, as they are the ones trying to defend an island that is legally and rightfully theirs. Unlike the US, China wants a peaceful resolution to the Taiwan question, but can and should use force if necessary (Cunningham, 9 October 2021). By connecting other conflicts where the US is involved, the narrative points to a looming future threat; the US might use Taiwan to pit Chinese people on both sides of the strait against each other.

The main narrative is strengthened by four subplots; (1) US strategy: from ambiguity to confusion, (2) US instigation of conflicts, (3) Taiwan as divided and divisive, (4) Taiwan as provocateurs.

Subplots

While the subplots display different reasons for why and who is ‘Rocking the boat’, the core problem remains the same: China’s strategic space is being increasingly poked. The subplots all contribute and strengthen the main narrative.

US strategy: from ambiguity to confusion

In this subplot, the US stance on the Taiwan question plays an important part of the heightened tensions in the region. References are made to the fact that the US do not formally recognize Taiwan, and yet they are providing arms and keep close informal relations with them (Spuntik, 7 August 2020). These references are used to establish the strategic ambiguity pursued by the US, which in itself is a problem of violating the “One China” principle (RT, 12 August 2020). While this have been the explicit strategy of the US for decades, the subplot presents strategic *confusion* as a new type of problem. The US domestic politics is a key theme as to why their foreign politics is filled with incoherence, inconsistency and incompetence. One story draws attention to the US separation of powers as a supposed defect in the design of US politics. This defect is attributed explanation for conflicting statements about their determinacy in Taiwan (Blinova, 29 July 2022). Furthermore, conflicting statements by Biden and the White House are presented as evidence of confusion in US politics over the Taiwan issue (Blinova, 23 May 2022; Blinova, 24 May 2022; Blinova, 8 July 2022).

This is not the first time that Biden has pledged to defend the island which is considered as an inalienable part of the People's Republic of China by Beijing. On May 23, the US president promised a military response should China attempt to "take Taiwan by force" during a press conference in Tokyo alongside Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. However, the White House intervened and played down Biden's comments (Blinova, 19 September 2022).

This narrative holds that the US is weak in its leadership and cannot be trusted, ascribing agency for rocking the boat to contemporary US politics and officials. While strategic ambiguity has been applied by the US since the creation of Taiwan, strategic confusion has appeared under Biden's presidency and may be a sign of US incoherence and weakness.

In other piece, US untrustworthiness and mixed signals is exemplified by US Navy vessels sailing through the Taiwan strait shortly after Beijing and Washington signed a trade deal (RT, 17 January 2020). The story of a US giving mixed signals reappears throughout the narrative. While signaling its willingness to engage in diplomatically with Beijing, affirming its commitment to the One China policy, the Biden administration have simultaneously formed a confrontational military pact with Australia and the UK – AUKUS – which is aimed at containing China (Cunningham, 9 October 2021).

Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 was widely covered. The planned visit is presented as a "chaotic and unorganized" political signal that is unlikely to be executed (Blinova, 30 July 2022). Further, the reader is told, the visit goes against the overall China policy pursued by Biden, further emphasizing the strategic confusion in Washington. In a follow-up article, as Pelosi fulfilled the plan by visiting Taiwan, Biden is depicted as a weak leader for not being able to control his officials (Blinova, 3 August 2022).

US instigation of conflicts

In this subplot, the US are not fools with diverging agendas, but villains that seek instigation. Agency for rocking the boat and unnecessarily defy status quo is ascribed to the US in general, various administrations and political officials specifically. In 2020, Trump signing the Taiwan Travel Act, allowing for US officials to visit Taiwan is exemplified as a threatening move. But, the story continues, the Democrats share this "framework of aggression", using Taiwan to push China (Sputnik, 14 January 2020). Biden who makes constant belligerent statements about defending the island (Blinova, 23 May 2022; Blinova, 19 September 2022), and Pelosi whose

historical visit to Taiwan (Blinova, 3 August 2022; Sputnik, 13 August 2022) appeared repeatedly in the narrative as events of this character. Citing China Daily's report on US officials visiting Taiwan, the claim is made that this was a move by the US trying to use Taiwan in order to contain China (RT, 21 September 2020).

By referring to US negligence to stability and peace in the Taiwan strait as serving US national interests rather than Taiwan's welfare (Blinova, 8 July 2022), the villain-victim relation between the two countries is further emphasized.

Citing the warning from a "mainland expert", Washington is depicted as provoking Beijing to fire the first shot. By doing this, China is renounced responsibility for a deteriorating situation and an eventual breakout of war (Spuntik, 2 September 2020).

Along with these actions, US arms sales to Taiwan are frequently depicted as the cause for heightened tensions in the region. In the past and present, the US have "pounded its imperial chest" to cover its embarrassments. This is exemplified with the invasion of Grenada, which followed the 1983 Beirut barracks bombings, where 241 US Marines were killed. Taiwan is used in the same way to draw attention away from Ukraine, where "NATO is losing badly" (Blinova, 29 July 2022). In the present and future, the US is portrayed as using smaller states as proxy for instigating conflicts with their geopolitical rivals is portrayed as a problem in the present and future.

The Chinese scholar does not rule out that the US wants to "replicate the Ukrainian model in Taiwan" by pitting the Chinese people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait against each other. He assumes that the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022, which encourages Taipei to join international organizations, is aimed at ramping up further tensions which could undermine regional security (Blinova, 19 September 2022).

These stories work to establish relationality of parts by connecting what is perceived as US instigation in one space, Ukraine, with a looming threat of future similar events in another space, Taiwan.

Taiwan as the divided space

In 2020, the narrative is thematically depicting Taiwan as divided at home and divisive abroad. Overall, the narrator depicts newly reelected Taiwan president Tsai Ing-wen in a bad light, often in contrast to the ‘Taiwanese people’ and other moderate political voices on the island.

She and her pro-independence party DPP, are continuously going against the interest of the people. Throughout their history, Taiwan have balanced between independence and coexistence with the mainland. Even though Tsai Ing-wen got elected president, the opposition party KMT and the Taiwanese people prefer maintaining status quo (Spuntik, 14 January 2020). One article tells the story of Taiwan’s plans to set up a government-funded agency to help asylum seekers from Hong Kong. Citing China’s State Council Taiwan Affairs Office spokesman, the narrator describes the plan as another example that will bring harm to the Taiwanese people, as the rioters bring chaos (RT, 20 June 2020). DPP and KMT also divergence on another issue, that of identity. While DPP proposed a unique Taiwanese identity, KMT adheres to the notion of belonging to a united Chinese identity (Sputnik, 14 January 2020).

The divisions go deep and can be seen in seemingly unrelated issues like the greenlighting of American pork and beef (RT, 28 August 2020). Announced by Tsai Ing-wen, the bill allows for the import of US meat containing ractopamine, an animal feed additive banned in over 160 countries. While also connected to US influence and meddling in Taiwanese affairs, the narrator puts the issue in the context of DPP and the president seeking US support and strengthening of their relations. This is all due to their pro-independence stance, challenging status quo. The decision is far from a unanimous one. In a follow-up article in November, chaos breaking out in the parliament, where the opposition threw pig guts, stands example of the division between parties (RT, 27 November 2020). On the one side stands the DPP, President Tsai Ing-wen and Prime minister Su Tseng-chang, who sees the US as a close ally and friend. Accounts of public protests against lifting the ban establishes a relationship between the ‘people’ and the opposition.

The audience is made to believe that the presidency of Tsai Ing-wen has not only met division and harm at home, but also abroad. In a piece that slams the US Taipei Act for punishing countries that sides with Beijing on the Taiwan issue, the narrator also points Tsai Ing-wen’s guilt for worsening Taiwan’s diplomatic relations in China’s favor (RT, 27 March 2020).

Taiwan as the provocateurs

In this subplot, Taiwan authorities has severely overestimated the securities that arguably follows from US armament of the island. The tensions between US and China have made Tsai Ing-wen more vocal in her pro-independence stance, souring relations between Taiwan and China (Sputnik, 7 August 2020). Not only does it worsen the Taiwan-China relationship. It also brings a false sense of courage to Taiwan's authorities to make provocations (RT, 14 July 2020). In contrast to the 'US instigation of conflict' subplot, where Taiwan was portrayed more as a victim of US geopolitical interests, this narrative assign agency to Taiwan and its 'secessionist' tendencies. The government is seen as the instigators, taking advantage of US-China tensions and seeking comfort in the US military aid (Blinova, 3 August 2022). Tsai Ing-wen and DPP thus becomes responsible for 'Rocking the boat'. The island's military is described fueling these provocations. Knowing that their president in an avid pro-independence promoter, they downplay China's combat capabilities (Sputnik, 2 September 2020).

Uncritically citing Ba Dianjun, a Chinese scholar at Jilin University, one article presents the reader with several risks with US provocative actions over Taiwan. Apart from the danger of US wanting to "replicate the Ukrainian model in Taiwan" by pitting Chinese people against each other, Taiwan's "separatist forces" are portrayed as taking rash decisions and looking for outside support using faulty notions of universal values. Further, Taiwan Strait is presented as a geopolitical anchor line for Japan, ending with a lesson to remember Japan's colonial past and its resonance with today's separatist elements in Taiwan. This way, the story establishes a temporal and spatial relationship between historical and present events (Blinova, 19 September 2022).

Summary

In the narrative projected by Sputnik and RT, the US and Taiwan are interchangeably responsible for the tensions in the Taiwan strait. While the agency in the US belongs to various administrations and officials, sharing a "framework of aggression", ruling party DPP and President Tsai Ing-wen bears most of the responsibility in Taiwan's case.

Continuously and uncritically citing Chinese experts and officials on the issue, the reader is exposed to their negative views of the US and Taiwan. Meanwhile, statements of the opposite are rarely included, which implicitly creates a story of how the US and Taiwan are 'Rocking the boat'.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed the strategic narratives projected by Russia and China about each other's sphere of influence. The sub-questions explored in answering the overarching research question were: *“What are the main narratives and their subplots?”* and *“How might Russian and Chinese strategic narratives strengthen or weaken the other's sphere of influence?”*.

Using a framework of narrative analysis, borrowing from Wagnsson & Barzanje (2019) and Somers (1994), this thesis has shown that Russia and China are projecting strategic narratives about each other's spheres of influence. The first sub-question is the one presented so far in the analysis. Further below, the second sub-question is discussed more in-depth.

In 2014, Global Times projected a main narrative of 'Ukraine as the chaotic space between spheres'. The main narrative was strengthened by three subplots: (1) Ukraine's internal split – cultural, political and economic chaos, (2) Indeterminate political leadership, and (3) Western thoughtlessness.

In 2022, Global Times projected the main narrative 'The victim of a faulty US-led order'. Three subplots were identified as supporting the main narrative: (1) The West as untrustworthy and contradictory, (2) US suppression and ignoring of security demands, and (3) Independent foreign policy and the importance of other major powers.

Sputnik and RT projected a main narrative of 'Rocking the boat' between 2020-2022. This was strengthened by four subplots: (1) US strategy: from ambiguity to confusion, (2) US instigation of conflicts, (3) Taiwan as divided and divisive, (4) Taiwan as provocateurs.

The two main narratives projected by Global Times – 'Ukraine as the chaotic space between spheres of influence' and 'The victim of a faulty US-led order' – display some important differences. While the narration in 2014 partially attributed the chaos to the internal split in Ukraine, the narration in 2022 almost exclusively displayed a notion of the US-led order as the problem. Further, both narratives presented a solution that entailed incorporation of China and their perspective. One important feature in the Chinese narrative of 2022 was the intersection of the subplots 'Independent foreign policy' and 'The West as untrustworthy and contradictory'. This can be characterized as a strategy that works to destroy the legitimacy of the current order, sough distrust between NATO members and their partners.

Russia was continuously depicted by Global Times as the victim of US “strategic suppression”, being pushed into a corner. This connection was later expanded to include China with regards to US aggression in the Asia-Pacific. Siding with the West and the US was suggested as a dangerous endeavor, which could only lead to bad things. The situation in Ukraine is put into a larger story of the current world order. It stands as a warning example of what could happen to other regions if the US continue to instigate conflicts in other regions, say, the South China Sea or Taiwan strait. Would conflict escalate in these regions, it will be only one side to blame; the US. Because of their unilateral judgement of conflicts, constantly ignoring the security demands of other major powers, the US have pushed Russia to intervene. In the narratives projected by Global Times, there is a “one sided” condemnation of the practice of spheres of influence. This is shown by only referring to NATO, the EU and the US as pursuing such spheres. While Russia is narrated as countering Western strategic expansion, they are omitted from the terminological labeling that is directed towards other parties in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Being portrayed as simply doing what is necessary to uphold their security demands, the Russian pursuit of a sphere of influence in Ukraine is implicitly legitimized.

In the Russian narrative, China played a prominent role. This narrative is contrary to that of Global Times, where Russia played a more peripheral role. Another difference found between the Russian and Chinese narratives was the prominence of the Self. Global Times continually narrated China as a quite central figure, standing as a feasible leader of a new order. Meanwhile, Russia was completely absent as an actor in the narrative projected by RT and Sputnik.

The historical background of Taiwan as a separatist province, not widely recognized internationally, was prominent from the beginning of 2020 throughout 2022 in the Russian narrative. While not factually disputed, constantly reaffirming this fact and simultaneously citing the “One China” principle, the Russian narrative leads the reader to understand the situation in a certain way, in favor of mainland China. By citing experts and Chinese officials, the Russian narrative is constructed as to give the reader a sense of objective and independent reporting. However, by temporal and selective appropriation, omitting certain event and reporting extensively on other, this narration is steered towards a logical sequence of events through which the reader is made more susceptible to accept the stories uncritically.

How might Russian and Chinese strategic narratives strengthen or weaken the other's sphere of influence?

Because this study does not analyze the effect of the strategic narratives, saying anything about how they strengthen or weaken the respective sphere of influence must remain hypothetical. The findings in this thesis indicates that Russian and Chinese news agencies, controlled by their respective government, project strategic narratives that might strengthen the sphere of influence of the other rising power. Several accounts of this are found both in the case of Russian media projecting narratives about China's pursuit of a sphere over Taiwan, and in the case of Chinese media projecting narratives about Russia's pursuit of a sphere over Ukraine.

Similarities was found in the way that the Russian and Chinese media sought to strengthen the spheres. Firstly, the Russian narrative placed Taiwan in the context of historically belonging to mainland China. Likewise, the Chinese narrative placed Ukraine as historically belonging to Russia. Secondly, both narrated the US or the West as the aggressors in relation to this lost territory, contributing to the notion of Ukraine and Taiwan as under Chinese and Russian exclusive control. Thirdly, the way in which the Russian and Chinese drew from the other sphere of influence as to narrate their own was an interesting finding. Legitimizing Russia's actions in Ukraine, Global Times implicitly sought to legitimize future Chinese actions in Taiwan. This was made by depicting the US as instigating conflicts around the world, from Ukraine to Taiwan. In doing this, both the Russian and Chinese media narrated the US as provoking them to 'fire the first shot'. Lastly, both Russian and Chinese narratives contained antagonistic features, which will be elaborated further below.

Relation to previous research

The Russian and Chinese narratives display traits of strategies proposed by previous research. Some stories resemble the antagonistic strategies presented by Wagnsson & Barzanje (2019). These were more explicit in the Global Times narration, presumable as a result of consisting entirely of op-eds where the narrator has the opportunity to be more vocal. The antagonistic narratives may very well be used by the external great power to strengthen the sphere of influence by the other. These narratives could have a destabilizing effect by making Ukraine and Taiwan look weak or eroding trust in their authorities, making them more vulnerable to control by foreign actors.

In 2014, the Chinese narrative of Ukraine as chaotic and indeterminate has the potential to destroy Ukraine's capabilities as a strong state, depicting them as having a weak leadership, not

being able to take strategic and rational decisions, and swaying back and forth between integrational processes. This narration can be likened with the strategy of *destruction*. Likewise, the strategy of destruction can be identified in Global Times' narration of Ukraine as lacking a coherent identity. Resulting from diverse ethnicities, languages and cultures, it is the root of the indeterminacy, as it creates a split between East and West. Similarly, the Russian narrative deploys a strategy of destruction against Taiwan, aimed at their supposed internal divisions. Like Ukraine, Taiwan is said to lack a united identity, where some adhere to the notion of a common Chinese identity, while others promote a unique Taiwanese identity.

The strategy of *suppression* is not frequently used in regard to Ukraine, but is present in the ridiculing of the Western imported "democracy". The presidency of Ukraine is depicted as lacking authority, giving in to the opposition and failing to unite the country. *Direction* was even less present in the Global Times narrative of 2014 than in 2022. By narrating the West as untrustworthy, contradictory and emphasizing the importance of other major powers, Global Times sought to direct Ukraine away from the Western partnership and toward an 'independent foreign policy'. This was mainly done by narrating China as a capable and neutral alternative to the US. In 2022, the narrative projected by Global Times was more inclined toward destruction and suppression of the West, not Ukraine. Narrating NATO as untrustworthy and incapable of a joint effort on European security, the 'West' was depicted as weak.

Despite the more implicit antagonism found in the Russian narratives projected by RT and Sputnik, they bear display traits of destruction. The strategy is found in the narrating of Taiwan as infused with false courage because of US support and arms sales. Thus, the reader is told that Taiwan is not as strong as believed. Arming the island actually makes them more insecure, portraying the pro-independence president Tsai Ing-wen as dangerously vocal in her rhetoric. The past status quo is challenged and cannot bring anything than harm to the Taiwanese people.

The narratives projected by Chinese and Russian media both focus on the US and the current world order. While Global Times seemed to emphasize this more, arguing for the faulty US-led order and presenting an alternative, Spuntik and RT also narrates the US as an unreliable and incompetent world leader. Sputnik and RT used a combination of other strategies in order to strengthen the Chinese sphere, among them appealing to China's legal right to take Taiwan by force "if necessary".

In sum, Russia and China are projecting strategic narratives of similar types about each other's sphere of influence. They use a combination of antagonistic strategies against Ukraine and

Taiwan, and stories drawn from more institutionalized narratives, such as “the legalistic order” and “fall of the West, rise of the rest”, while also narrating a new world order in general. Their close relationship, evident in several cooperative treaties, is shown in the way that their pursuit of spheres of influence is portrayed in state media.

5.1 Limitations and suggestions for future research

Due to different timeframes chosen for Global Times and RT/Spuntik, a strict comparison between the two is not possible. The Global Times narrative of 2022 and RT/Spuntik 2020-2022 is somewhat comparable, and the findings are similar. They both focus on the US as the main opponent. While Global Times projected antagonistic strategic narratives about Ukraine in 2014, their strategy antagonism was refocused toward the US in 2022. This was also the case with the narratives projected by RT and Sputnik. While Taiwan was narrated in a slightly antagonistic fashion, a temporal comparison with an earlier time period might have found a similar shift as in the case of Global Times.

While the findings in this study is limited to the separate spheres pursued by Russia and China respectively, studying the contexts two spheres of influence may overlap is important to further the insight to how great powers manage this conflict of interests. Furthermore, analyzing the other communicative processes formation and reception, future research could explore the empirical material used in this thesis to study: the mechanisms of the narrative formation; and how the narratives resonate with the audience. Because the audience in this case is somewhat unclear – being other states that “considers to act pawns for the US”, other great powers such as the US, or the people in Ukraine and Taiwan respectively – this suggestion opens up for a large academic pursuit.

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Appendix

Code-scheme

Questions pose to the data	Code
Who are the actors involved?	Actors/characters
What are the events?	Events
What are the spaces?	Space
How do the stories emerge, continue, and change over time?	Temporality
What is the problem posed? What are the reasons behind the problem?	Problem/conflict, Positioning
What are the suggested solutions?	Solution