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Countering Chinese and Russian Narratives

Introduction:

“Narrative” is a neutral term. A political and strategic narrative is “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors”.¹ A narrative consists of a sequence of causally related events and their structural features include characters/actors, scene/setting, obstacle/puzzle to overcome, tools to achieve this end and desired or feared end-states. Three types of interwoven narratives can be identified:

- **Identity narratives** are narratives about an actor, the factors that constrain and define their actions, character and ideas, how the actors will behave in the future and who is considered friend, enemy, small power, great power, etc.
- **Policy narratives** advance normative or interest-based agendas.
- **System narratives** focus on the economic or political systems actors inhabit, such as liberal world order, bi-polar order, polycentric order, etc.

Narratives evoke emotions, shared identity, and are tailored to specific audiences. Successful narratives are supported by coherent actions, strategic communication, and control of the narrative, multipliers, and interpretive predominance. Narrative can both foster cooperation or confrontation depending on the willingness of the actors to align in constructing shared meaning or not. An example of the former would be: “climate change as challenge for mankind that can only be overcome collectively”.

Russia’s Global Order Narrative:

“Russia’s” world view and strategic outlook places itself in relation to other states in a new global order. This has implications for resilient democratic counter narratives. In a narrow sense, “narrative” refers to what the Kremlin says, but says nothing about what the people in the Kremlin think. A sharp distinction needs to be drawn between genuine cognitive and instrumental perceptions, that is, between what decision-makers really think (deeds as “revealed preference”), and what they *claim*, what they *profess* to think, so as to influence domestic and foreign audiences (which can constitute “rhetorical camouflage”).

A second clarification concerns the question as to what it is that is meant when we say: “Russia thinks”, or when we try to fathom “Russia’s strategic interests”. Essentially, we are talking about what “Putin” thinks. This is increasingly *analytically correct*, indeed, the system he has built has aptly been called the “Putin System.” It is autocratic, authoritarian and increasingly centralized, that is, it is based on the “vertical of power” (*vertikal’ vlasti*). Decisions of any significance in domestic or foreign policy cannot be made without participation and

¹ Miskimmon, A, O’Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L., *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

consent of the Kremlin's chief. That applies even more so to the formulation of basic foreign policy directions.

If we want to broaden the notion of "Putin", when we are talking about the "Russia's world view" and "Russia's strategic interests", we are essentially talking about those of the Russian power elite that at present is dominated by the *siloviki*. Just as the new political thinking of the Gorbachev era was shaped by the *institutchiki*, the return to traditional Great Power and Geopolitical Concepts in the *Putin era* is shaped by the *siloviki*. Putin and the Moscow power elite have restored many of the elements of the Soviet leadership's ideas about international affairs. These include the notions that:

- Power, prestige, status, and influence of any given country in world affairs depend on the size of its population, geographical expanse, endowment with natural resources, volume of industrial and agricultural output, and access to or control over human and material resources abroad.
- The most important factor determining the influence of a country in international affairs, the main driver of many things, is military power. Military power is not only an instrument of deterrence but also of "compellence", that is, weaker countries can be forced to comply with Russian demands.
- The greater the discrepancy between one's own military capabilities and that of the opponent(s), the more effective the threat. As Sergei Karaganov notes: "Starting from the middle of the 2000s, Russia began strengthening its military-political potential, inexpensively but very effectively ... [It] rebuilt its military machine, a first-class resource in a world of growing chaos and fierce competition." "With the latest generation of weapons, we have shown that we can lead wherever necessary, and at small cost." Russian "[military power] cut the ground from under the foundation of the centuries-old dominance held by Europe and the West." "[And] by [having] rebalanced economic ties towards the East [notably towards China] and reduced [our] overwhelming economic dependence on the West [we have gained] more room for manoeuvre."²
- Russia is not just a European power but is also a power in Asia. As a Eurasian power and should be the "leading forcer" in this geopolitical space. Eurasia, the Kremlin asserts, is Russia's exclusive sphere of influence, an area of legitimate "special" or "privileged" interests. To quote Putin at the annual gathering of Russian ambassadors in 2004: "If Russia were to abstain from an active policy [in that space] or even embark on an unwarranted pause in the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States], this would inevitably lead to other, more active, states resolutely filling this geopolitical space."
- Ukraine is of special importance, as Putin made clear in his July 11, 2021 article *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. He claims that the current Ukrainian government pursues a policy of "forced assimilation" of ethnic Russians and is bent on establishing an ethnically pure Ukrainian state that is aggressive towards Russia, comparing the consequences of this approach to "the use of weapons of mass destruction" against Russia. "The West is complicit in this endeavour. It intends to transform Ukraine into a barrier between Russia and Europe, into an anti-Russian

² Sergei Karaganov, "On a Third Cold War", *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 3, July/September 2021: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/on-a-third-cold-war/> (accessed 16 February 2022).

“springboard”. “It cultivates the image of an internal and external enemy and pursues the militarisation of Ukraine (including the expansion of NATO’s infrastructure on its territory).” “Moscow will never allow its “historical territories” and the people living there to be used against Russia. Those who undertake such an attempt will destroy their own country.”

- A further driver and important part of the Russian narrative is that the West is fundamentally and irreconcilably ill disposed towards Russia. Its aim is to “contain” Russia, maximally to weaken and constrain it; to limit its global and regional influence; and even, if it saw corresponding opportunities, to dismember it. Following the Beslan terrorist attack in September 2004, Putin on national TV stated: “Generally speaking, one has to admit that we failed to understand the complexities and dangers of processes under way in the world. At any rate, we failed to respond appropriately to them. We showed weakness. And the weak get beaten.” Evidently specifically in relation to the North Caucasus, he said that “Some would like to tear off a ‘juicy piece’ from us. Others help them. They help, because they believe that Russia as one of the major nuclear powers is still a threat to them. A threat that should be removed. And terrorism is, of course, a mere instrument to achieve such aims”.
- Finally, objectively systemic competition exists between democracy and authoritarianism in the world order. The Kremlin holds in this respect that the Western governments’ clamor for the universal dissemination of human and civil rights, pluralism, democracy and the “free flow of information” with the help of so-called “non-governmental organizations” is part and parcel of hybrid warfare against Russia and designed to subvert its global and regional influence. One of the major techniques used by them are so-called “color revolutions,” that is, the overthrow of legitimate governments.

The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) Narrative:

The CCP has long history in constructing its (and a Chinese) narrative. The CCP’s narrative depicts a cooperative approach to adapting/transforming the world order; the West could use this narrative to reduce tensions. The CCP exercises control over its narrative using open and covert means.

- The CCP’s leadership has strongly controlled its narrative for decades. Even before gaining total control over mainland China, Mao was convincingly promoting his narrative of the peoples struggle for liberation, the present and future to Western journalists and Soviet officials.
- The active work on CCP’s and China’s history was institutionalized with the first so-called “Resolution on History” by Mao in 1945 (7th plenary session of the 6th Central Committee), followed by Deng³ in 1981 (6th plenary session of 11th Central Committee) and most recently by Xi in November 2021 (6th plenary session of 19th Central Committee). The CCP uses this narrative to demonstrate and cement its legitimacy to

³ Deng’s 4 cardinal principles (March 1979): The principle of upholding the socialist path; The principle of upholding the people’s democratic dictatorship; The principle of upholding the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); The principle of upholding Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism–Leninism.

rule. As such, the narrative is preface to the Chinese Constitution and every report to the CCP Congresses.

- Every resolution represents a new era in Chinese history (standing up, getting rich, and getting strong). The three iconic figures Mao, Deng, and Xi have “liberated” political space for the future development of China by establishing rule/dictatorship of the Chinese people (i.e. communist revolution), opening China and hence enabling economic growth, eradicating societal differences in wealth and opportunity and leading China on its path to its natural status as a Great Power.
- The role of the CCP is emphasized in this narrative, its central mission to bring happiness to the Chinese people and rejuvenation to the Chinese nation. In November 2012 with the “China or Chinese Dream” Xi’s narrative has widened its focus from the Chinese people to the world (“Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a New Era”, October 2017). This identity narrative is complemented by stronger policy and system narratives. The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is now described in an international setting in which modernization (Westernization) is an aberration leading to severe challenges to the whole mankind. Chinese wisdom can help to solve global problems.
- One strand in this CCP narrative currently is that the CCP has confidence in its path, its theoretical salience, Chinese institutions and Chinese culture. It encourages all developing nations to initiate their own paths to modernization (contrasting this to Western endeavors, and comparing it with new international communist movement). China’s system “offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers China’s wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind”.
- An example of Chinese wisdom is the “All under Heaven-theory” (*Tianxia*), rooted in China’s history (Zhou-Dynasty, ca 1100 -256 B.C.), when a small state governed a number of large states. The aim is not to return to the historic (tribute) system but to use the experience to create a new world order/governance in which mankind can prosper. China contrasts two different concepts - Roman imperialism and Chinese *Tianxia*. Both have “worldness” perspectives. Imperialism wants to create a universal world by domination (maximize self-interest), while *Tianxia* seeks to create a sharable world (co-existence and compatibility, co-existence as prerequisite for existence, maximize shared interest).
- *Tianxia* comprises three elements: a) a geographical real or physical world, b) socio-psychological world (network of relations), and c) legitimate world system/institution. Currently, according to the CCP, while the geographical world is real, there are no shared interests or legitimate world institutions (“non-world”); the world is in stage of anarchy and mankind is in danger of losing the world.
- To realize *Tianxia* and achieve shared world interests and cooperation, four concepts need to be put in place: 1) internalization of the world (non-exclusiveness, overcome the division between friends and enemies); 2) relational rationality (overcome individual rationality which seeks to maximize self-interests, in order to minimize mutual hostility);

3) Confucian Improvement (system is legitimate if it improves situation of every actor); and, 4) compatible universalism.⁴

- The BRI, new type of Great Power relations are posited as counter-narrative to the “Thucydides Trap” (hot war) or “Churchill Trap” (cold war), and as a means of criticizing the US for forging a bipolar narrative (Strategic Competition). Currently we find ourselves in a war of narratives which has the potential to lead to a new “Cold War”. China blames the US for waging a “public opinion war on China”. It claims that the West has an ideological bias against China.
- China actively spreads its narrative and shapes the discourse by using different means. It totally controls domestic discourse through censorship and pressure on journalists. It actively influences the Chinese diaspora and key-persons in academia, economy, and politics abroad and influences foreign media outlets.
- This results in a multifaceted, adaptive, and complex set of tactics that are deployed across varied environments. They combine widely accepted forms of public diplomacy with more covert, corrupt, and coercive activities that undermine democratic norms, reduce national sovereignty, weaken the financial sustainability of independent media, and violate the laws of some countries.⁵
- Trends since 2017:
 - Russian-style social media disinformation campaigns and efforts to manipulate search results on global online platforms have been attributed to China-based perpetrators.
 - Tactics that were once used primarily to co-opt Chinese diaspora media and suppress critical coverage in overseas Chinese-language publications are now being applied—with some effect—to local mainstream media in various countries.
 - Beijing is gaining influence over crucial parts of some countries’ information infrastructure, as Chinese technology firms with close ties to the CCP build or acquire content-dissemination platforms used by tens of millions of foreign news consumers.
 - There is evidence that Chinese-owned social media platforms and digital television providers in multiple regions have engaged in politicized content manipulation to favor pro-Beijing narratives.
 - Chinese officials are making a more explicit effort to present China as a model for other countries, and they are taking concrete steps to encourage emulation through trainings for foreign personnel and technology transfers to foreign state-owned media outlets.

⁴ That is, to bind universalism to relations not to individuals and accept the diversity of cultures; the basic principle being: “any value that can be defined by symmetrical relations can prove to be universal and inevitable, and can gain general consent. Any value that cannot be defined by symmetrical relations only represents personal preferences or specific values of a particular group”. Zhao, T. *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance* (Singapore: Palgrave, 2019), 60. In other words, a mono-theological ideology that believes its values are universal and that others should adopt as the only value system generates conflict among civilizations.

⁵ Cook, Sarah. (2020); <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone> (accessed 15 February, 2022).

- Additionally active Information Operations from the Chinese side are initiated both by persons and bots. One notable example is the 20 Million strong Communist Youth League spreading CCP propaganda on social media. China realizes that it will not persuade the US and other Western countries so the “prize” in strategic competition are developing countries that seek their own development path (see above). China is quite successful in this competition: the Afobarometer 2019/20 “Best model for development” placed the USA at 32%, China at 23% and countries rated their own model at 7%. China was rated 63% as a positive external influence, with the US at 60%.

Conclusions: China and Russia’s Respective Roles in the New Order?

Ideologies consist of clusters of ideas that link problems, to blame and point to solutions. Both Russia and China advance identity, policy and systems narratives. In terms of apportioning “blame”, Russia and China are aligned – the US and its allies are to blame. However, both China and Russia identify different problems and posit different solutions. Thus, there are points of convergence as well as competition between Russian and Chinese narratives.

China works with the current international order where it appears to serve its interests, and circumvents it where it believes that it does not. Despite the means China uses to propagate its narrative, the narrative itself is cooperative in its nature. Russia’s narrative stresses the need for confrontation with the “totalitarian West”. Russia actively strives to destroy the Western, rule-based system. It now rejects the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe as an essentially anti-Russian project. Currently China views the uneven distribution of wealth within China as the primary contradiction to be overcome (in accordance with the logic of dialectical materialism), Russia views the uneven distribution of power in the international system as the core problem, and either a new Cold War or Global Concert of Great Powers as the solution. In contrast to the Soviet era, however, Russia does not have a missionary purpose and it does not advance a counter or alternative system. Unlike China, Russia lacks its own compelling vision of the future, a developmental or modernization paradigm.

Russia stresses friendship and cooperation with China, but a Russian critique of the Chinese system of governance appears taboo. China, though, views the collapse of the Soviet Union that saw the emergence of the Russia Federation as an object lesson in what not to do. Understanding the linkages between Russian and Chinese narratives helps develop resilient democratic counter narratives. It also can identify potential fracture points between Chinese and Russian narratives – whether that be over a Ukraine invasion by Russia or Taiwan by China, competing interests in the Arctic or contestation of the Eurasian shared neighbourhood.

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Disclaimer: This summary reflects the views of the authors (Hannes Adomeit, Falk Tettweiler and Graeme P. Herd) and are not necessarily the official policy of the United States, Germany, or any other governments.