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China as a Narrative Challenge for NATO Member States

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Background paper co-authored with Filip Sebok, available at [NATO StratCom CoE](#).

Main argument and questions

- China's challenge for Europe/NATO has been too often perceived through narrow lenses (esp. military and economic)
- → **strategic narratives should be put in the centre of our focus**
- How strategic narratives fit within overall Chinese foreign policy?
- How China talks to NATO (member states)?
- What is the reception and implications?

Strategic narratives and Chinese FP

- Key 'core' interest of CCP: regime security
 - Economic development
 - Proving nationalist credentials
- Strategic narratives
 - Spreading positive images of China
 - Prevent actions undermining China's interests
- But also to reassert own role and self-perception

- → contradictions between domestic and international audiences

Key pillars of China's strategic narratives

- **Culture** – Chinese culture as inherently peaceful, respect for harmony, order. This contrasts with the “Western colonialism and imperialism”
- **Economy** – own recipe (i.e. not following “Washington consensus”) of remarkable development success
- **Responsible power** – to transform current international system into a better one, share economic success and contribute to global governance. Non-interference as a key principle.
- → China presented as the alternative to the West

Narratives towards European NATO countries

- NATO explicitly appears very little in Chinese official narratives
- Strategic autonomy (multipolar international order)
- Covid19 – shift from defense to offense
 - First victim of the virus, deny wrongdoing
 - After pandemic got under control in China, Beijing presents itself as part of global solution – masks and vaccines
 - Some disinformation, but mostly selective reporting
- CAI – victim of the “wolf warriors”
 - Potentially a major achievement in terms of “EU independence”
 - Frozen after China retaliates with asymmetric sanctions against EU actors

Who tells "China's story" and how

- Embassy and diplomats – general ‘wolf warrior’ trend, but big differences between countries (e.g. Poland vs Hungary or Latvia). Often actions seem performative (e.g. Sweden vs Slovakia).
- State media – wide spread but often struggle with localization
- Social networks – recent rise in use, but dubious impact
- Foreign media – “China Watch”, advertisements, content sharing agreements
- Foreign friends – foreign as well as domestic use (within China)

Summary of main points

- We need good understanding of Chinese strategic narratives and their strengths and weaknesses – do not exaggerate nor underestimate!
- Unlikely that NATO publics would massively buy Chinese narratives
- But, various “alternative” actors can find Chinese strategic narratives as useful for their own benefits
- Also, more emphasis on the third countries, especially in the developing world
- Potency of Chinese strategic narratives would be significantly determined by the performance of NATO member states and their own narratives