

China's influence in Northern Europe

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Abstract

China is no longer the same developing country, and the EU is realizing this as well. Chinese influence has also started to spread throughout the globe, reaching most of the global south and Europe. Most of the current research has focused on Chinese influence in Africa or Central and East European countries, this policy briefs attempts to identify Chinese influence in Northern Europe instead. While much of the region remains sceptical and critical towards China, the threat that China poses on these countries is still present. China also seems to be changing its tactics after COVID, realizing that 'wolf warrior' diplomacy may not be viable, if it ever was. China will likely revert to more covert tactics to try and influence countries abroad, by making use of its economic power, disinformation campaigns, and attempts to silence individuals and media. This requires a more updated strategies by countries in Northern Europe. The Nordics and the Baltics have been updating their China policies in recent years, but to protect themselves from Chinese influence requires further understanding of China. This policy brief will introduce and summarize some of the Chinese influences that have been used in the region, it will also suggest possible policies in order to combat these influences. Dealing with Chinese influence need to not only be reactive, but preventive as well.

Key words: China, foreign policy, foreign influence, security

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1. Introduction

With an ever-increasing tighter grip domestically, China has begun to shift its focus of influence not only within its neighbourhood, but attempt at influencing European, African, and South American countries are becoming ever more prevalent. One such example being the recent expansion of the BRICS, with the addition of Argentina, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), China looks to counterbalance the western alliance in the current world order (Independent, 2023). China's continued expansion in the South China Sea (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023), more assertive rhetoric and actions regarding the Taiwan Strait (The Associated Press, 2023, August 26; Maizland, 2023), and numerous overseas police stations (dos Santos, 2022; Hawkins, 2023) are other examples of China's ambition and actions taken to expand its influence outside its own borders. China is no longer the same country it was at the turn of the century, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China has grown into the largest exporter and the second largest economy in the world. China's ability to influence other countries should not and cannot be taken lightly. While President Xi states that China has no intention of becoming a world hegemon a number of occasions (Lee, 2021; Zhou, 2023), the actions taken by China abroad puts this statement into question.

Most of the focus regarding China's influence in Europe has been on either Southern Europe, such as Italy and Greece, or Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), such as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. This is in large part due to the increased foreign direct investment (FDI) into these areas. This report aims to shed more light on China's influence in Northern Europe, understood here as the Nordics (this report will only focus on Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) and the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), and provide policy suggestions for how to address China's influence in these two regions. China seems to have gained the most favours in countries that are struggling more economically, in contrast, none of the Nordics countries fall within this category, so how effective has China's influence been in these countries? The Baltics on the other hand are not as economically powerful, but their history as former Soviet satellite states have made them cautious against foreign powers trying to influence or dominate them, especially communist countries. All three Baltic States are also part of NATO, furthering distancing themselves from China in some sense.

Nevertheless, despite some of these possible difficulties, China has not given up on expanding its influence in these regions. China has shown to become more assertive and make use of more aggressive tactics towards countries that has shown unwillingness to adhere to their demands. A clear example can be identified in the case of Sweden, where the previous Chinese ambassador to Sweden, Gui Congyou, made several remarks condemning, threatening, and criticizing Sweden (Taylor, 2020); these were in response to Sweden's unwillingness to give up on Gui Minhai, a Swedish national that was kidnapped by Chinese authorities. Challenging China also runs the risk of losing the world's largest exporter as a trade ally, which many countries fear. China is no longer just the developing country that made all the goods in the world, as stated by the European Union: *"The EU continues to deal with China simultaneously as a partner for cooperation and negotiation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival"* (European External Action Service, 2023). China has also realized this change and has and will continue to adapt its own approach abroad. This change also means that it is more important than ever to re-evaluate the relationship EU, and more specifically Northern Europe, hopes to have with China, and to do this, it also requires a better understanding of the influence China currently exerts over Northern Europe. This report outlines economic investments, political strategies, and resources that are being used by China in Northern Europe to increase its influence. It will also give policy advice for policymakers on how to address some of the ongoing and possible future concerns in regard to Chinese influence in the region.

2. Background

2.1 Nordics

The Nordic countries have historically been quite amicable towards China and have only in recent times distanced themselves. In the past, the Nordic countries have established multiple cooperative projects, memorandums of understanding, and accepted Chinese investments to deepen the relationship (Forsby, 2022, June 24). Of the Nordic countries, only Denmark and Finland host pandas gifted by the People's Republic of China (PRC), often times associated with China's interests and optimistic relationship with the countries. This has also been called Panda Diplomacy, and only a few select European countries have

been gifted giant pandas. Sweden was also one of the first countries in the western world to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1950 (Embassy of Sweden in Beijing, 2020). Norway, on the other hand, has not had much interaction with China historically. Furthermore, an incident in 2010 where the Norwegian committee gave the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese activist, caused the relationship between the two countries to be strained and diplomatic relations were frozen until 2019. China has also been regarded as an important trade partner for all four countries, often being the largest trading partners from Asia.

The relationship between the Nordic countries and China changed in 2019, when China was started to be perceived as a security threat, not just by the Nordics but a majority of European countries (Forsby, 2021, December 8). All four Nordic countries also signed a joint statement in 2019, expressing their concerns for China's treatment of Uyghur and calling for an end to the mass arbitrary detentions and human rights violations (Mansfield et. al, 2019). This sentiment seems to have continued, as public opinion of China in Sweden has shown to be the most unfavourable among EU countries (Silver, Huang & Clancy, 2023). Leaders of the four countries have also changed how China has been discussed. For example, Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has described China's foreign policy as *"more active and assertive"* (Kristersson, 2023, May 30). In turn, Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs Anniken Huitfeldt in her address to the Storting, the Norwegian parliament, in 2023 also stated *"certain aspects of China's economic system are problematic"* (Huitfeldt, 2023, May 5). Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs has also stated concerns for Finnish strategic dependencies on China, and the need to reduce risks across critical supply chain (Valtonen, 2023), something many of the other Nordic countries have also expressed concerns for.

2.2 Baltics

The relationship between the Baltics and China is relatively new compared to the Nordic countries. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the three countries gained independence in 1991, and were only then able to start any form of diplomatic relations with China. However, Latvia already faced difficulties initially in the relationship because of its official diplomatic ties with both the PRC and Taiwan, which resulted in China freezing diplomatic ties in 1992. The relationship resumed in 1994 after Riga closed down its consulate-general in Taiwan. China sent ambassadors to Estonia and Lithuania in 1993, and Latvia in 1995 (Park, 2022). China has not prioritised the relationship between the Baltic States as much compared to other countries, most likely due to the difference in both territorial size and economy. The three countries were also initially viewed as part of the Central and Eastern European sphere, being included in the 16+1 economic cooperation between China and a multitude of the CEE countries (Kuo, 2023). But the Baltics' growing aspirations to build closer ties to Western countries have shown China where the Baltics' allegiance lies. The more recent disputes and disagreements have further alienated China from the three countries. A number of events highlights the growing dissatisfaction: China recalling its ambassador to Lithuania in 2021, and Lithuania following suit (The Associated Press, 2021, November 21); the condemnation by the three Baltic States issued towards China's envoy to France (Tanner, 2023, April 23); and China's increased military cooperation with Russia (Faulconbridge, 2023, November 8) just to name a few.

While the Nordic countries' relationship with China seems to have slowly taken a turn for the worse, there are still some hopes of continued cooperation. For the Baltics, continued diplomatic relationships with China seems to have taken a huge step backwards. China's recent attempts to include the three Baltic States in its Belt and Road Initiative also seems to have failed. Even though there is a need for better infrastructure, China has not been successful in convincing any of the three countries (Larsen, 2020). Although Lithuania has been the most defiant towards China out of the three countries, Estonia and Latvia have both decided to withdraw from the 17+1 format (previously 16+1) (Park, 2022), and the relationship is not likely to get any better due to China's close ties with Russia.

3. Chinese political influence

3.1 Nordics

3.1.1 Chinese embassies

Looking at messages, remarks, and news that have been published by each of the respective countries' embassies can show China's 'official' standpoint about their host countries. As has been noted by many other works, many Chinese diplomats seems to be practicing 'wolf warrior diplomacy', an assertive form of diplomacy in which Chinese officials have become more outspoken and assertive in their own stances (Duan & Liu, 2023, September 22). While it can be argued that these messages that are being published by embassies are rarely read by the public, it does show if China is more assertive in their nature when trying to relay official statements or not towards the four Nordic countries. One more prominent ambassador was the previously discussed Chinese ambassador to Sweden, Gui Congyou, that made multiple appearances in both Swedish and international news and was even summoned by the Swedish foreign ministry regarding comments he had made (Tanner, 2020, January 18). The remarks made by officials and available information on the embassy's website can also better highlight important issues that China deems necessary to focus on in each of the countries.

'Spokesperson's remarks'¹ have been used quite often in both Sweden and Denmark, while not as often in Norway and even less so in Finland. These remarks are often in response to certain issues that has been raised in either the media, comments made by politicians/political parties, or to express dissatisfaction from the Chinese side. Previously, from 2018 up until the arrival of the newest ambassador, Sweden received many 'spokesperson's remarks', so much that there was even a dedicated link for all the remarks made at one point (Embassy of China in Sweden, n.d.a). This has since been removed, and there have been noticeably less remarks made since the arrival of the new ambassador. These remarks can still be found under the embassy news (Embassy of China in Sweden, n.d.b). Denmark has instead found itself becoming a new target for these 'spokesperson's remarks.' Since 2020, there have been 32 remarks issued (Embassy of China in Denmark, n.d.). These remarks are mostly in response to comments and accusations made against China, rebukes and criticisms towards the Danish foreign ministries and officials, and warnings against the local media and journalists. The remarks in Sweden followed a similar pattern as the recent remarks in Denmark. Where Swedish individuals, scholars, news media sites, journalists, and some politicians were accused of lying and fabricating facts and working against China (Embassy of China in Sweden, 2020, June 17; Embassy of China in Sweden, 2019, January 18; Embassy of China in Sweden, 2019, May 15).

As stated earlier, while these remarks will often not be viewed by the local population, it rather shows Chinese diplomats and overseas attempts at silencing any opposition or criticism aimed against China. In these remarks, Chinese officials and spokespersons will often claim they are stating simple facts, however, these statements often times simply mimic the rhetoric that all other Chinese diplomats and officials states rather than addressing the criticism they are trying to highlight. In a remark aimed at political figures in Sweden, China defends itself from accusation of being a security threat by stating: *"It (China) has been an important contributor to world peace and justice and is committed to building a community with a shared future for humankind"* (Embassy of China in Sweden, 2019, May 15), a catchphrase that has been used by Chinese President Xi Jinping and many other Chinese entities (Gao, 2017). The remarks also take on a tone of a victim, a recent remark made in 2023 in response to the Danish intelligence service report on espionage threats, the remark states as follows: *"We urge the Danish side to abandon the Cold War mentality, stop slandering China, and do more for the healthy development of China-Denmark relations"* (Embassy of China in Denmark, 2023, May 3). Finally, the remarks seem to want to silence free speech. In a remark aimed at Sweden in 2019, the final sentence reads: *"We ask the Swedish side not to allow any anti-China political activities or advocacy of violence and hatred on the pretext of "freedom of speech"* (Embassy of China in Sweden, 2019, August 28).

The spokesperson's remark has been used by Chinese embassies as a tool to both spread China's rhetoric abroad and as a way to warn those that voices dissatisfaction or disagrees with China. By using 'a spokesperson', the ambassador is also able to show that they are defending China abroad, while at the same time remove any direct association with what is being said in these remarks.

¹ This is not to be confused with another form of 'spokesperson's remarks' that some embassies, such as Estonia and Latvia, have on their websites, which refers to China's foreign ministry's spokesperson's remarks aimed at Chinese foreign relations in general.

3.1.2 New China strategies

The Nordic countries were some of the first to recognize the PRC and establish diplomatic relations with China. Sweden was one of the earliest countries that did so in 1950, when ambassadorial relations were established. Finland opened its embassy in Beijing in 1952, Norway in 1954, and Denmark followed in 1956. The relationship today is quite different unfortunately. The most recent spat between China and a Nordic country is with Finland, where Finland has accused a Chinese ship of causing damage to a gas pipeline and two communications cables in the Baltic Sea (Kauranen & Sytas, 2023). Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson initially seemed to not completely agree with the investigation and stating that *“the Chinese vessel was sailing normally at the time”* (Tanner, 2023, October 25). According to Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, China has since changed its stance and is now *“promised to do good collaboration”* in regard to the investigation (Hülsemann & Giordano, 2023, October 26). The other Nordic countries have also been on the receiving end of Chinese scrutiny, Sweden being the more recent and severe case with the case of Gui Minhai (Kellogg, 2018, January 31; Motion 2022/23:144). Norway also had frozen diplomatic ties since 2010 because of Liu Xiaobo. In turn, Denmark has faced several instances of strained relationship caused by multiple different events in recent years, relating to Hong Kong protests, sanctions imposed by China on Denmark, and an incident involving a cartoon depicting the Corona virus over the Chinese flag (Creery, 2020). Sweden has been in constant political tension since 2015 because of Gui Minhai, and later China’s ambassador to Sweden, Gui Congyou.

These strained relationships with China have also resulted in the Nordic countries updating their views on China through action plans, reports, or foreign relations papers (The Security Policy Analysis Group, 2022; Motion 2021/22:1812; Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Finland, 2021). These updated stances often use the same description of China used by the EU in 2019, which views China as *“a cooperation partner... a negotiating partner... an economic competitor... and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance”* (Press and Information Team of the Delegation to China, 2023, August 15). These updated views and reports have not gone unnoticed by China, as many of these have been met with dissatisfaction expressed by some of the respective countries’ embassies (Embassy of China in Denmark, 2022, December 23; Embassy of China in Sweden, 2022, June 24). Finland’s Ministry for Foreign Affairs published a Governmental Action Plan on China in 2021, where Finland’s stance, future plans, and views on bilateral relations with China is described in detail (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2021). Some of the concerns expressed are the *“tightening political climate and weakening human rights situation in China...”* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2021) and that China is exerting more political and economic pressure on other countries that disagrees with China. While the report still expresses Finland’s hope to continue bilateral relations with China, many of the points that have been written out about cooperation also seems to be coupled with words of warning due to China’s changing landscape. Denmark does not have an official China strategy like Finland, however, in a report published by the Danish intelligence service (PET) raised concerns for rising espionage threat from China (Gronholt-Pedersen, 2022), to which the spokesperson for the Chinese embassy was quick to express its dissatisfaction and calling it *“groundless and ridiculous”* (Embassy of China in Denmark, 2023, May 3).

In 2019, the previous Government of Sweden published a white paper concerning China, which can be seen as a China strategy. In it, they express concerns for national security, but still hopes to maintain and establish relations with China (Sweden Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). In 2023, the Swedish security service published its annual report for 2022-2023, titled ‘Resilience in a troubled international climate’ (Säkerhetspolisen, 2023). In this report, China, along with Russia and Iran, is highlighted as one of the main threats to Swedish security, citing China as a *“growing and long-term threat”* (Säkerhetspolisen, 2022). Chinese investment and acquisition of Swedish technology, products, expertise and data are pointed out and regarded as a threat to Swedish security. The attempts by China to exert pressure on dissidents living in Sweden is also highlighted, and how China puts resources in attempts to influence the opinions of individuals (Säkerhetspolisen, 2022). The Swedish Defence Commission has also submitted a report on Sweden’s Security Policy in June 2023. In it, China is not considered a military threat, but is considered one of the driving forces for undermining multilateral cooperation and institutions, as well as creating instability in the Indo-Pacific region (Ministry of Defence, 2023, June 19). The new government that was elected in 2022 will need to re-evaluate Sweden’s relationship with China. The increasing threat assessment of China towards Sweden’s national security and EU as a whole will likely require an update of its previous China strategy from 2019.

Norway was one of the earliest countries to establish a China strategy. Already in 2007, the Norwegian government published 'The Government's China Strategy', where it laid out three points of engagement with China:

1. Promote Norwegian business interests, expertise, and values;
2. Integrate environmental, climate change, and sustainable development concerns into all Norwegian efforts vis-à-vis China; and
3. Encourage China to play a more active role in a world community based on respect for human rights, solidarity, equitable distribution, and sustainable development. (Utenriksdepartementet, 2007, August).

These three points along with national security seems to dominate the discussion in Norway in regard to China (Gåsemeyr, 2023). Norway also seems to be the country on best terms with China in the Nordics, as they are currently in the discussion of establishing a free trade agreement (FTA) with China, although the discussion seems to have been put on hold since 2021 as the Norwegian side needs more time to "consider the issues at stake and how to safeguard our interests" (Jennings, 2022). Despite the ongoing FTA discussions, the Norwegian Security Service, Intelligence Service, and the National Security Authority have all published their own reports, pointing out China as a security risk for Norway (Norwegian Police Security Services, 2023; Nasjonal sikkerhetsmyndighet, 2023; Norwegian Intelligence Service, 2023). These reports highlight China as threat to Norwegian intelligence, such as technological know-how, expertise and sensitive information (Norwegian Police Security Service, 2023). Also highlights China and its increased interests in cyber warfare and development of "more advanced methods of psychological warfare and influence operations" (Norwegian Intelligence Service, 2023). Although Norway still maintains close economic ties with China, China being one of its most important trade partners, it seems that they are also moving in a similar direction as the other Nordic countries, which may lead to an updated China strategy from the Norwegian government.

3.2 Baltics

3.2.1 Chinese embassies

In the case of the Baltic States, an obvious difference is the lack of an embassy in Lithuania. As previously stated, China recalled its ambassador in 2021, and the embassy was then changed to an Office of Charge d'Affaires. Although the embassy is no longer, the remarks and statements made are still available on the website². The remarks made by the Chinese embassies in Estonia and Latvia's spokesperson started around the same time as it did for Denmark, at the end of 2019/start of 2020. The first Chinese embassy in Latvia's spokesperson's remark was made at the end of 2019 (Chinese Embassy in Latvia, 2019, December 30). The first Chinese Embassy in Estonia's spokesperson's remark was in mid-February of 2020, although it was called a statement the first time (Embassy of China in Estonia, 2020, February 14). In Lithuania, the first remark was made at the end of April 2021 (Office of Charge d'Affaires of China in Lithuania, 2021, April 23). Since the start of these remarks made, Latvia has received 18 since 2020, Estonia has received 10, and Lithuania has received 13³.

In 2022, Lithuania received the most remarks out of the three Baltic States, unsurprising as Lithuania has also been the most outspoken against China in recent years. Although the number of remarks is less compared to the Nordic countries, the function is still the same, to refute and silence comments made by Lithuanian politicians and parties, as well as express dissatisfaction and warn Lithuanian authorities. The first remark was made at the end of April 2021, commenting on the Seimas⁴ discussion on Xinjiang, where the remark claimed the discussion was "choreographed by some anti-China individuals intended to smear China" (Office of Charge d'Affaires of China in Lithuania, 2021, April 23). The remarks made also attempts to dispute and change the narrative, often claiming any criticism aimed at China is coordinated by anti-Chinese forces in an attempt to "meddle in China's internal affairs under the pretext of human rights, tarnish the image of China, to undermine China's stability and to contain China's development by leveraging the so-called human rights issue of Xinjiang" (Office of Charge d'Affaires of China in Lithuania, 2021, April 23). Since the leave of China's ambassador to Lithuania, these comments have instead turned into 'comments'

² On the website, there is a 'spokesperson's remark' link, but this one is for the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson and not specifically Lithuania's Office of Charge d'Affaires spokesperson.

³ Comments and statements by Charge d'Affaires is counted as remarks, since the embassy no longer exist.

⁴ Seimas is the parliament of Lithuania.

made by the office. While the name has changed, the content remains the same as before. The number of comments has also increased substantially, in large part due to Lithuania's closer relations with Taiwan, which can be seen in the content of the comments made (Office of the Charge d'Affaires of China in Lithuania, n.d.). Of the nine comments made since the start of 2022, eight have been about Taiwan, and one was about NATO (Office of the Charge d'Affaires of China in Lithuania, n.d.).

For Latvia, which received the most total number of remarks since 2020, the content has been a mixture of different kinds. The tone of these remarks is however the same, condemning and refuting the statements and actions made by Latvian authorities and individuals. For example, the first remark made refuted the claims of the Latvian Information Agency (LETA) report, which in turn cited the Security Service that Chinese service activities are likely to increase (Embassy of China in Latvia, 2019, December 30), where it stated that *"the accusations of Chinese services carrying out activities in Latvia are nothing more than speculations out of thin air and totally unfounded"* (Embassy of China in Latvia, 2019, December 30). In mid-2020, two Canadian nationals were prosecuted by Chinese authorities. This also resulted in the embassy spokesperson to put out two remarks concerning the result of the trial (Embassy of China in Latvia, 2020a; Embassy of China in Latvia 2020b). While there were some concerns expressed by the Latvian MFA (2019, January 4) prior to the trial, Latvian officials did not raise the issue any more than other nations. This pre-emptive remark also showcases China's attempt to control the narrative before it becomes an issue. Although the attempt was not successful in influencing Latvia's support for the two Canadians (Fraiman, 2021, April 14), it highlights that China might move beyond only responding and refuting statements but also try to stop any anti-Chinese statements before they can happen. Latvia also received a number of remarks concerning Taiwan; These remarks followed the increased cooperation Latvia conducted with Taiwan, together with Lithuania and Estonia. All three countries sent representatives to Taiwan in 2021 to participate in the Open Parliament Forum that was held in Taiwan, where they also met with the Taiwanese President whom hoped to increase cooperation with the three Baltic states (Eng.LSM.lv, 2021, December 1). The remarks seemed to have stopped after the new Chinese ambassador to Latvia was appointed in June 2023.

The Chinese embassy in Estonia have made the fewest remarks comparatively to the other two Baltic States. The most common remarks seem to have been made in response to the reports published by the Estonian intelligence service and foreign ministries. These reports often point out China as a security concern, to which the spokesperson's remarks will refute, stating things such as: *"It is full of hearsay and patchwork, and smears China by citing sources which "cannot be commented", spreads fake news publicly, and misleads the public with ulterior motives"* (Embassy of China in Estonia, 2021, February 18) or *"it maliciously speculates on China's goodwill and is completely irresponsible"* (Embassy of China in Estonia, 2022, February 17). These statements echo the statements made by their Danish counterparts, and also seem to paint China as a victim of smear campaigns while at the same time condemns any and all criticism towards China. The remarks will also often end with the Chinese side 'suggests' or 'requests' the other side to be more objective and *"based on facts and truth, to correct its wrong expressions to remove the negative impact"* (Embassy of China in Estonia, 2020, February 15), although it seems that only the Chinese perspective is accepted as the real, objective truth.

3.2.2 New security threat

For Lithuania, the threat of China seems to have increased drastically. In a recent report titled 'For a Secure, Resilient and Prosperous Future: Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy' published by the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the report states in its first point:

"Given the swift rise of China in the region and beyond, the trajectory of its domestic development and mounting readiness to alter the international order, the Indo-Pacific has become one of the main arenas for strategic and geopolitical tensions to play out."
(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023).

Highlighting the shift in focus from the threat of Russia towards China. This should not come as a surprise given the rising tension between Lithuania and China, as China has tried to implement economic coercion through sanctions on Lithuania in response to the previously mentioned Taiwan dispute, where Lithuania opened a Taiwan Representative Office in Vilnius (Reynolds & Goodman, 2022, May 6). These economic coercions will be discussed in the next section. Estonia has also received a warning from China about opening its own Taiwan office. Estonia hopes to establish non-diplomatic relations with Taipei, stating it to be in line with many other EU countries policy (Lau, 2023). China has also been labelled as a

security threat in the annual report published by the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, described as planning “to use the *Global Security Initiative to disrupt the Western security architecture*” (Valisluureamet, 2023a, February 8). While the report still mainly focused on Russian action for the most part, a striking conclusion from the report stated: “*some pre-war trends have strengthened, likely increasing the inequality in their relationship*” (Valisluureamet, 2023b, February 8). Highlighting China’s growing influence and Russia’s further dependencies on Chinese economic and technological development. Latvia’s Constitution Protection Bureau’s (SAB) annual report also discusses China as a growing threat, although to a lesser degree compared to the two other Baltic States. The focus is still mainly on Russia, but in the context of China, Russia’s growing dependencies on China is highlighted extensively throughout the report (Protection Bureau of the Republic of Latvia, 2023).

The Ukrainian war has not only revealed Russia’s weakness, but also shown China’s growing influence, not only in its own neighbourhood, but in the rest of the world as well. As China becomes the new non-western leader, the Baltic States’ security reports have highlighted how China will try and use more assertive means abroad. As stated in Lithuania’s security report: “*China is prepared to utilize the economic, political, diplomatic, and other types of coercion to achieve its goals*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023), this likely coming from first-hand experience. Chinese use of coercive measures has been well documented from other countries as well besides Lithuania, such as Australia (ASPI, 2023), South Korea (Park & Kim, 2023, January 11), and a multitude of other private companies has also experienced similar coercive measures (Adachi, Brown & Zenglein, 2022).

4. Chinese cultural influence

4.1 Panda Diplomacy

The panda has been a symbol of China, as well as a sign of Chinese goodwill since the 1940s. Countries that receive a panda from China are often times considered to be on good terms with China, and there have been instances where China has recalled pandas when these past relationships have deteriorated. Pandas from some of the zoos in the USA have been recalled by China, and the UK and Australia are due to also lose their pandas unless they are able to establish a new deal with China (Sands, 2023). Of the examined countries in this report, only Finland and Denmark have pandas from China currently. Denmark has two pandas currently in Copenhagen Zoo, Mao Sun and Xing Er, which both arrived in 2019 on a 15-year lease from China. Finland also houses two pandas Lumi and Pyy at the Ähtäri Zoo. They arrived in Finland in 2018, after Xi Jinping visited Finland signing a joint agreement on protecting pandas (Reuters, 2023, January 27). In the beginning of 2023, there were discussions of returning the pandas to China due to financial reasons, but the Ähtäri Zoo decided to keep the pandas in the end, hoping that the new tourist season post-pandemic would make up for the cost of leasing the two pandas (Yle News, 2023, April 28).

Panda Diplomacy in these two countries have received criticism, due to the fear that both countries would be less willing to speak out against China on the international stage. The pandas have usually signalled China’s satisfaction after a deal has been successful, such as the case in Finland. This would also explain the reason as to a lack of pandas in Norway and Sweden, as neither country have had a visit by Chinese President Xi in recent years; Furthermore, with Sweden’s dispute with China and with Norway only restoring their relations with China in 2017, it might be a while before either country receive a panda from China.

In the case of the Baltics, none of the three have received a panda from China. The likelihood also seems to be slim, as all three countries have taken distance from China. Since China seems to reward countries with pandas on ‘good behaviour’, the standoffish attitude the Baltic States have taken in recent times would suggest that receiving a panda is not a priority currently.

4.2 Confucius Institutions/higher education

Confucius Institutions (CIs) have long been discussed as an apparatus for Chinese influence abroad (Peterson, Oxnevad & Yan, 2022). Designed as Chinese language schools abroad, often in cooperation with universities, CI offers language courses for foreigners interested in learning about China and the Chinese language. The teachers are all flown in from China, and students are sometimes offered opportunities to visit China during their studies. Sweden was the first country to open a CI but was also

the first western country to close down all their CI back in 2020 (Moody, 2020; Flittner, 2020). The reason for the closing was due to a growing distrust from the Swedish side, in large part due to the souring relationship between the two countries due to the Gui Minhai case (Flittner, 2020). The only CI in Norway has also closed down in 2021 (ChinaScope, 2021). Moreover, Finland has also closed down its CI in 2022 (Yle News, 2022, June 18). Denmark has one remaining CI after previously having three, with one being a unique music CI that has also closed down (Forsby, 2021, April 1).

Contrary to the Nordics, the Baltics do not seem to view CIs as much of a threat. All three countries still host a CI at their universities. The Tallinn University and the Vilnius University both opened the CI in 2010, and the University of Latvia opened its CI a year later (LRT, 2019, September 5). Currently, the CIs are still operating based on their active websites for each of the universities (Vilnius University Confucius Institute, n.d.; Tallinn University, n.d.; CI at the University of Latvia, n.d.). The CIs hosted at local universities are also often in cooperation with a Chinese counterpart. For the Baltic States, the Tallinn University's partner is Shanghai University of Finance and Economics (Tallinn University, n.d.), the Vilnius University is partnered with Liaoning University (Vilnius University Confucius Institute, n.d.), and the University of Latvia is partnered with South China Normal University (Confucius Institute at the University of Latvia, n.d.).

While the universities themselves do not seem to have any plans to close down their CIs, the CIs have been mentioned in a report published by Lithuania's intelligence services as a form of Chinese intelligence tactic (State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, 2019). CI has also been reported previously to have close relations with the central government of China itself, as the teachers and staff report directly to Han Ban, or the rebranded new Chinese government agency, Center for Language Exchange and Cooperation (CLEC) (Peterson, Oxnevad & Yan, 2022). As previously mentioned, the staff of the CIs is selected by the Chinese government and Hanban, the host universities are then allowed to select teachers from an already vetted list of Chinese teacher candidates provided by Hanban and the partner universities (Peterson, Oxnevad & Yan, 2022). While the CIs are often put forward as a way to spread Chinese language and culture, they should be viewed as much more than that. Several reports have been published documenting their close relationship with the central government of China, and their attempts to spread Chinese views and influence students' opinion on matters relating to China. The CIs have long been used by China as a form of soft power, spreading Chinese culture and language. The closing of these institutions could signify a decline in Chinese soft power in Nordic countries, which in large part can be attributed to growing security concerns and human rights concerns associated with China. However, the continued operation of the CIs in the universities in the Baltics should be taken into consideration when discussing the national security and Chinese influence in these countries.

5. Chinese economic influence

5.1 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was started by President Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI has been described as a modern-day silk road, aimed to connect China with the rest of the world through funding by Chinese banks and companies to build infrastructure in connected countries (Sacks, 2021). A large number of countries have joined the BRI, with most countries located in large parts of Asia and Africa. The countries that have decided to not join are mostly located in North America, South America, and Europe, and are often times more democratic, politically stable, and most economically developed (Nolan & Leutert, 2020). This is not to say that these factors determine whether a country will join the BRI or not, as some US allies, such as South Korea and New Zealand, have also become members.

There seems to be two types of memberships within the BRI, depending on if the country signs a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) or a cooperation agreement with China. The former being the better, a more formal option, while the latter can be seen as being in the 'waiting room' to become a full-fledged member of the BRI. This would indicate that while China hopes to incorporate as many member countries as possible into the BRI, certain countries need to reach a threshold in terms of economic development and political stability before becoming MoU members of the BRI (Nolan & Leutert, 2020).

Of the countries discussed in this report, none of the Nordic countries have participated, while all three of the Baltic States are members of the BRI. This divide allows for an interesting comparison of China's influence through the BRI in member countries, and whether it is an effective tool for China in terms

of influence. While the Nordic countries are not members, that is to say they have not signed any type of cooperation agreement or MoU with China, the BRI is still present in these countries. In Sweden, the Belt and Road Institute in Sweden (BRIS) have been praising the BRI and the opportunities it can bring to both Europe and Sweden, stating its goal to be: *“To promote an open dialogue and greater awareness about the BRI and its benefits for Sweden, China, and the world community”* (BRIS Sweden, 2018). Business Sweden has also presented the BRI as an opportunity for Swedish companies that are operating in the BRI countries (Business Sweden, 2019). Chinese companies have also been involved in the construction of infrastructure in some of the Nordic countries. In Sweden, the main focus seems to be on railway traffic, seen for example in MTR, owned by the Hong Kong government, has become one of the main competitors to SJ, Sweden’s state-owned rail traffic company. In Norway, Chinese companies was also contracted to build two bridges, opened in 2018 and 2020. There have also been speculations of constructing an arctic railway, connecting northern Finland and Norway, in which Chinese companies would be very interested, although the project is not likely to proceed due to the need to build on the land of the indigenous Sami (Almén & Weidacher Hsiung, 2022). An undersea tunnel connecting Helsinki with Tallinn has also been in discussion for a long time, and it has finally found a Chinese sponsor to fund the project. If completed, this will be the longest undersea tunnel in the world (Railway Supply, 2023)

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania could be argued to no longer being active members of the BRI, as all three countries have decided to withdraw from the previously mentioned 17+1 grouping and have all been quite vocal about their dissatisfaction with China (Cerulus, 2021, September 3; Lau, 2021, May 21; The Associated Press, 2022, August 12). Membership in the BRI has also been quite unclear, while signing an MoU or a cooperation agreement with China can be seen as a sign of participation, there is not an official list of all member countries currently in the BRI. Furthermore, it also does not make it any easier to determine whether a country is a member since not all countries have the BRI-related projects and might merely be endorsing the initiative (Sacks, 2021). A task force from the Council on Foreign Relations tried to identify all members in 2021, they managed to identify 139 different countries to be part of the BRI, with some countries date of entry into the BRI being unknown. Latvia entered in 2016, while Lithuania and Estonia entered a year later in 2017 (Lew, Roughead, Hillman & Sacks, 2021). Yet despite their entries, there have not been any large-scale or noteworthy BRI projects in any of the countries, and an almost negligible amount of foreign direct investments (FDI) have entered from China into the Baltic States (LRT, 2019, September 16). While the BRI was initially thought to be an opportunity for the Baltic States, it seems that the lack of success and the growing tension between China and the west has resulted in the three Baltic States reassessing and re-evaluating their participation in their Chinese cooperatives, and instead warning other EU states to also take caution when dealing with China (Cerulus, 2021, September 3; Lau, 2021, May 21; The Associated Press, 2022, August 12).

While the BRI has been heralded by Xi and the CCP to be an altruistic project, aimed at connecting the world through a modern-day silk road, the North European countries seems to think differently. While initially, most of the countries seemed to view the BRI as a way to establish closer economic ties with China, the security concerns relating to the BRI has been raised by many of the countries. In 2020, the Swedish defence department published a proposition title ‘total defence 2021-2025’ in which Chinese private companies are highlighted to be a security concern due to the civil and military integration policy China has in place, where the government are privy to technologies developed by private companies. This had raised concerns for other countries as well, that China might take advantage of sensitive infrastructure, such as 5G. To counteract this, several countries, including Australia, Denmark, Japan, Norway, Sweden, and the United States, have taken measures to protect their infrastructures as well as implementing investment protection measures and stricter regulations for the acquisition of sensitive technologies (Swedish Government, 2020). While the BRI seemed to have been successful initially, North European countries have in recent times become more wary of the Chinese initiative.

5.2 Foreign direct investment (FDI) by China

The United States and Europe have long been the main destinations for Chinese FDI. From 2005-2019, Chinese companies invested \$624.4 billion, just over half of all Chinese FDI during this period, into these two regions (China Power Team, 2021). However, Chinese investment to Europe reached a peak in 2016 and has been declining since. In 2022, Chinese FDI amounted to \$7.9 billion, compared to its peak of \$47.4 in 2016 (Kratz, Zenglein, Sebastian & Witzke, 2022). The decline could be attributed to the growing concerns for Chinese FDI as a security threat in the EU, expressed by multiple larger EU actors.

Looking at the Nordic countries specifically, Chinese FDI has been active for a long time, some of the largest Chinese acquisition of Nordic companies, such as Swedish Volvo or Norwegian Elkem and Awilco Offshore happened before 2011, there have also been other larger acquisition since, such as Tencent's acquisition of Supercell in 2016 and Anta Sports by Amer in 2019 (Almén & Weidacher Hsiung, 2022). Since 2016, the world's largest terrestrial stations in Kiruna, Esrange Space Centre, has also been cooperating with Chinese Academy of Sciences Institute of Remote Sensing and Digital Earth (Jåma & Olofsson, 2019, 15 January). A report published in 2020 by the Swedish Defence Research Agency showed that Finland received the most amount of Chinese FDI as of 2020, amounting to 5.2% share of GDP, followed by Norway, then Sweden with around 2% both, and Denmark last with 0.4% (Almén & Weidacher Hsiung, 2022). Previously, Nordic countries also presented itself as an attractive destination for Chinese FDI due to its high technological innovation skills as well as more less regulatory policies (Conley, Lewis & Shafron, 2020). This has however changed in recent years, as the Nordic countries have started to implement stricter regulations in regard to foreign investments. Finland changed its investments policies in 2012, with amendments in 2014 and 2020, whereas Norway implemented a new National Security Act in 2018 that included an ownership control chapter. In turn, Denmark implemented an Investment Screening Act in 2021, and Sweden has started the process of implementing a more rigorous FDI control regime (Mattlin & Rajavuori, 2023). The shift in attitude towards FDI is likely due to the growing dissatisfaction and threat perception of China, coupled with an EU wide shift in narrative.

Chinese FDI in the Baltic States are considerably less compared to the Nordic countries. Despite previously being part of the 16+1 cooperation and the BRI, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have received much less investments from China. Chinese FDI accounted for less than 1% of total FDI in all three countries, although there seemed to be a growing trend in recent years, it was still somewhat insignificant (Andžāns et al., 2022). The trend in the Baltic States regarding Chinese FDI also followed a similar pattern as the Nordic countries, with an initial optimistic view in regard to Chinese investments, but a shift in the general opinion of China line with the general EU change of view in 2019 (Larsen, 2020). The change was also likely due to the failure of China to deliver on its promises. Despite promises of investment and business opportunities, the BRI has failed to deliver any major projects to the Baltic States, the 16+1 (17+1) cooperation has also failed, functioning mostly as a format for China to identify countries sympathetic to its own agenda (Larsen, 2020).

6. Policy suggestions

For both the EU and China, there seems to be a shift in their views and approach to each other, this goes for North European countries as well. 'Wolf warrior' diplomacy is no longer working, if it ever did, and China realizes this too. We can see this both from how Chinese officials act overseas compared to previously, as well as Xi's recent meeting with Biden that resumed Chinese relations with the USA (Ruwitch, 2023; Martina, Hunnicutt & Torode, 2023). The more assertive tactics employed by China will likely decrease, and China will likely make use of more covert tactics to gain influence and skew public opinion abroad. This brief has only managed to cover a few topics relevant to Chinese influence in Northern Europe, there are a multitude of other topics that was not mentioned, such as making use of social media like TikTok and western influencers (Kynge, 2023) to push Chinese propaganda abroad, attempts at attracting foreign talents to China, and taking advantage of the ongoing crises around the globe to further sell the Chinese approach to non-western countries.

For Northern Europe, China is no longer the developing country it was 10 years ago, reflected in the many reports covered in this brief. China is continuously growing as a threat, both domestically and globally, and while Northern Europe seems to be the most aware of this within Europe, further actions are still recommended to be implemented to protect vital infrastructure and state security. One of China's more well-known strategies at this point is the acquisition of and building of infrastructure. Many countries have already implemented countermeasures in order to stop China from acquiring vital infrastructures in their countries. For example, Denmark, Sweden and all three Baltic States have already banned Huawei from their 5G network (Rolander & Ek, 2020). However, other infrastructures should also be examined, such as the energy sector and public transport sector. According to a recent study by MERICS, Chinese investment to Europe has shifted from mergers and acquisition to greenfield investments (Kratz, Zenglein, Sebastian & Witzke, 2022). This shift in investment signifies a need for policymakers to also change their focus towards not only protecting existing companies, but also implement more thorough vetting devices when foreign companies invest in new buildings. According to the report, Chinese

projects involves parent companies creating subsidiaries in other countries that will build from scratch (Kratz, Zenglein, Sebastian & Witzke, 2022), and without the same strict guidelines as foreign acquisition, there is an increased risk of vital infrastructures falling into Chinese hands.

China's massive push for electric vehicles (EV), mainly battery driven cars, also falls in line with the shift into greenfield investments. Chinese EV brands have started to enter the European market, and while the European Commission has started an investigation into whether Chinese EV value chains are benefiting from illegal subsidisation (European Commission, 2023), North European countries should also implement measures to protect their own manufacturers. Chinese manufacturer will also likely grow into other fields, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and semiconductors, and may also cause economic injury to the EU market due to unfair subsidisation. Identifying these fields before they become an issue should also be on top of the agenda for EU policymakers. Chinese state subsidies have long been of concern for international companies, and they continue to be an issue. With Chinese investments changing into greenfield, these subsidies could prove to be even more advantageous for Chinese companies, as they are able to compete and dominate European manufacturers from an abundance of funding if there are no mechanisms in place prior to Chinese investments flooding the EU market.

Another topic that was not mentioned in this brief, but that is still relevant and would require further research is China's United front work, a network of individuals and groups that are influenced by China operating abroad to advance China's interests. This has been examined by some countries in Northern Europe (Nyrén, 2020, September 16; Puranen, 2022; Jüris, 2020), however, further examination and attention should be paid to the United front works activities in the region. This should also be expected to increase as China changes its tactics to be less assertive and more covert and indirect.

Finally, while not mentioned much in this brief, Chinese cyberattacks have been and continues to be a concern, which have been highlighted by the foreign service in multiple North European countries as well as the European Parliament (2023, December 8). The continued strengthening of each country's cyber security should be of vital importance, as well as increased efforts to combat the spread of disinformation through various channels, such as social media and news media. Additionally, China becoming less assertive does not indicate that the ambition is faltering, but rather a change in approach by the Chinese side. Rather than countering every single criticism with threats and warnings, it seems that China instead has shifted its focus on more covert tactics, such as the spread of Chinese propaganda online and competing in agenda setting within international organisations, one example being 'China Standards 2035' in 2018 that aims to set global standards for emerging technologies. These relatively newer forms of influence attempts should be taken more seriously, since China is able to change their approaches much faster compared to European policies implementation. To avoid falling victim to Chinese influences in the future, policies need to not only be reactive, but preventive.

7. Conclusion

Northern Europe is starting to realize that China has changed over the years. The hope that China may one day democratize is no longer, and Xi's control over the country seems to be more solid than ever before. This change in China also influences the dynamic between the Sino-EU relationship, and in turn Northern Europe. Chinese influence has not been as effective in Northern Europe compared to the rest of the continent, the BRI has largely failed, multiple countries in the region have updated their China policies making them more cautious of China, and the Baltic States have distanced and, in some cases, antagonized China. Nevertheless, Chinese influence is still a threat to Northern Europe, in terms of security, but also discourse and narrative control, economic, and disinformation.

As China changes its tactics to more covert ones, so too must North European countries prepare themselves before hand to tackle these newer tactics. This requires proper knowledge of China, and to identify what possible weaknesses that may be targeted, such as critical infrastructure, Chinese activities on social media such as disinformation and influencer tactics, and economic coercions to name a few. This report has highlighted some of the activities of China within the region, and also suggested policies to combat these attempts of influence by China. Countries need to not only react to Chinese influence, but also to prepare and prevent for them before they are allowed to happen.

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