

2023

Peaceful World Leadership or Nationalist Advocate? How China Uses Social Media to Project its Stance on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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PEACEFUL WORLD LEADERSHIP OR NATIONALIST ADVOCATE? HOW CHINA USES SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROJECT ITS STANCE ON RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

Hannah Bailey, University of Oxford

ABSTRACT

Authoritarian states are increasingly using international social media platforms as a tool to influence public discourse in foreign states. But what narratives do these authoritarian states prioritize? What motivates this choice of narrative? And, are these narratives amplified by their target audience? This article addresses these questions by quantitatively measuring the evolution of the People's Republic of China's state-backed media narratives on Facebook about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This analysis covers the period in the lead up to, and the months that follow, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I use the case of PRC rhetoric on Ukraine for two reasons. First, the PRC's policy approach to Ukraine is unclear, as there is a contradiction between its support for Russia and the assertion that Ukraine has territorial sovereignty. The PRC, therefore, presents no clear narrative on what it seeks to convey to international audiences. Second, in light of this contradiction and the lack of an obvious policy stance on Ukraine, this case is an opportunity for us to observe how the PRC's choice of narrative evolves over time, and which foreign policy goals the PRC prioritizes in its international rhetoric. This article finds that the PRC's state-backed media rhetoric on Facebook alternates between: (1) presenting the PRC as a diplomatic and responsible actor with no clear stance on the conflict; and (2) fuelling domestic nationalism by framing the war as the result of Western aggression. Yet, while the PRC state-backed media appear eventually to settle on the latter narrative as its solution to the aforementioned policy contradiction, over the whole time period, state-backed media outlets on Facebook produce a higher volume of content promoting the PRC as a responsible actor than they do blaming the West. The PRC's shift between two narrative approaches on Facebook reflects the larger

contradiction at the heart of the PRC's foreign policy, that is: does it project itself as seeking to enhance the use of diplomacy, or as stridently anti-West?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Authoritarian states use international social media platforms to influence public opinion. States such as Russia, Iran and the People's Republic of China use various tools, including coordinated networks of fake or inauthentic accounts, paid advertisements, and state-backed media, to influence online discourse.¹ Scholars have shown that Russia uses these tools primarily to disrupt democratic elections and amplify polarizing

1. See Edward Wastnidge, *The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War*, 35 *POLITICS* 364, 365 (2015).; Mona Elswah & Philip N. Howard, "Anything that Cause s Chaos?: The Organizational Behavior of Russia Today (RT)", 70 *J. COMM'N.* 623, 642 (2020); Frederik Hjørth & Rebecca Adler-Nissen, *Ideological Asymmetry in the Reach of Pro-Russian Digital Disinformation to United States Audiences*, 69 *J. COMM'N.* 168, 1 70-74 (2019); Gary D. Rawnsley, *Communicating Confidence: China's Public Diplomacy*, in *ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY* 284, 294-95 (Nancy Snow & Nicholas J. Cull eds., 2d ed. 2020); Arjun M. Tambe & Toni Friedman, *Chinese State Media Facebook Ads Are Linked to Changes in News Coverage of China Worldwide*, 3 *HARV. KENNEDY SCH. MISINFORMATION REV.* 1, 1-3 (2022).

narratives.² However, the PRC's objectives are less well understood. The PRC appears to prioritize both: (1) projecting the image of a responsible global leader adhering to international norms of peace and humanitarianism; and (2) aggressively countering Western states, and in particular the US, to foster domestic nationalism.³ But when and why do PRC state-backed media deploy these two narratives? Do they prefer one over the other? And how successful are these narratives at engaging international audiences?

This paper addresses these questions by identifying how and when the PRC shifts between these two narrative approaches. I argue these shifts are reflective of larger internal policy changes within the PRC and are indicative of the wider policy goals of the PRC.

I examine how the PRC's uses social media to influence international opinion by studying how PRC state-backed media respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Using 4,405 Facebook posts⁴ by PRC state-backed media, I show a shift in both narrative approach and the volume of posts at key moments in Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the twenty-fourth of February 2022. While the PRC's narrative approach initially involves fairly neutral reporting and heavily focuses on diplomatic calls for peace by the PRC's official spokespeople, there is a noticeable shift in April 2022, toward a more nationalistic narrative that frames the conflict as the outcome of US-led actions. This narrative shift, however, is accompanied by a large fall in the volume of posts about Ukraine. So, while the narratives in PRC state-backed media may change to reflect internal policy shifts and a desire to mobilize domestic nationalism, media targeted toward

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2. Nathaniel Persily, *The 2016 U.S. Election: Can Democracy Survive the Internet?*, 28 J. DEMOCRACY 63, 64, 70-71 (2017); Peter Pomerantsev, *How Putin Is Reinventing Warfare*, FOREIGN POL'Y (May 5, 2015, 9:14 PM), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/05/how-putin-is-reinventing-warfare/> [<https://perma.cc/LBT9-KT5E>].
 3. Ingrid d'Hooghe, *China's Public Diplomacy Goes Political*, 16 HAGUE J. DIPL. 299, 310 (2021); Clyde Yicheng Wang, *Changing Strategies and Mixed Agendas: Contradiction and Fragmentation Within China's External Propaganda*, 31 J. CONTEMP. CHINA 9, 13 (2022).
 4. Facebook is inaccessible within the PRC; therefore, PRC state-backed media is directing such content towards international audiences. Rawnsley, *supra* note 1, at 294.

international audiences appear to vocalize diplomatic and peaceful narratives on a greater scale than more aggressive nationalist narratives.

A. The PRC Faces a Narrative Contradiction on Ukraine

Although the Russia-Ukraine conflict is just one issue, the scale of the conflict and global attention it has received makes this case an important opportunity to track the PRC's evolving international narrative. Moreover, there is an apparent contradiction that runs through the PRC's policy towards war in Ukraine, which can be described as seeking neither to oppose Russia nor abandon Ukraine.⁵ The apparent contradiction of the PRC's approach to the war can be described as follows: a desire to maintain ties with Russia while attempting to maintain a long-held national principle of respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty. The PRC is committed to a partnership with Russia.⁶ While the precise form of the partnership is, conveniently, not very well defined, it is a major part of the PRC's foreign policy.⁷ Closely allied to this line is the view of PRC foreign policy that Russia has legitimate security demands, has been a victim of NATO expansionism, and likewise of the United States seeking to propagate discord.⁸ Opposition to United States interest is a dominant theme here, consistent with the argument that Russia has been wronged by Western interests and thus forced to protect its own security.⁹

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5. *See, e.g.*, Michael Martina et al., *China Says It Respects Ukraine's Sovereignty and Russia's Security Concerns*, REUTERS, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/china-says-it-respects-ukraines-sovereignty-russias-security-concerns-2022-02-25/> (Feb. 25, 2022, 4:07 PM) [perma.cc/4PYZ-M6FN].
 6. *See Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development*, PRESIDENT OF RUSS. (Feb. 4, 2022), [hereinafter *Russia and PRC Joint Statement*] <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770> [https://perma.cc/T8BV-229R].
 7. *See id.*
 8. *Id.*
 9. *See, e.g.*, Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, Address by the President of the Russian Federation (Feb. 24, 2022, 6:00 AM), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843> [https://perma.cc/2M7A-KQFX].

The PRC is also, however, committed to the principle of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries. This forms one of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which date back to the Sino-Indian Agreement of 1954.¹⁰ The Five Principles are: (1) mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; (2) mutual non-aggression; (3) mutual non-interference in internal affairs; (4) equality; and (5) cooperation for mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence.¹¹ The Principles were included in the preamble to the Constitution of the PRC.¹²

The PRC's emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity is, of course, a bedrock of its One Nation policy in respect of Taiwan and Hong Kong.¹³ In terms of relations with Ukraine, the PRC recognized Ukraine as a sovereign state on the twenty-seventh of December 1991.¹⁴ The apparent contradiction of China's commitment both to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other nations, including Ukraine, as well as its friendship with Russia, was evident in the comments of the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, to European officials, that "China respects countries' sovereignty, including Ukraine's, but that Russia's concerns about NATO's eastward expansion should be properly addressed."¹⁵

Is this contradiction more apparent than real? My answer to this question is that it depends on the state of affairs at the time;

10. Agreement on Trade and Intercourse Between Tibet Region of China and India, China-India, Apr. 29, 1954. Also known as the Panchsheel Agreement, in accordance with the original term limit it expired on June 6, 1962. It was not renewed due to border tensions between China and India.

11. *Id.*

12. XIANFA pmbl. (1982) (China).

13. Jue Stanton, *The "One China" Policy: Terms of Art*, 13 AM. J. CHINESE STUD. 79, 84 (2006); Jessica Drun, *One China, Multiple Interpretations*, CTR. FOR ADVANCED CHINA RSCH. (Dec. 28, 2017), <https://www.ccpwatch.org/single-post/2017/12/29/one-china-multiple-interpretations> [<https://perma.cc/RL39-6T87>].

14. Ukraine declared its independence on the 24th of August 1991. *Ukraine's Turbulent History Since Independence in 1991*, REUTERS, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-turbulent-history-since-independence-1991-2022-01-31/> (Feb. 21, 2022, 2:17 PM) [<https://perma.cc/MAB6-FJ64>].

15. Martina et al., *supra* note 5.

balancing the contradiction has been very apparent in the PRC's use of rhetoric during the Ukraine conflict.

In more normal times, the PRC has relied on the principle of "indivisible society" to manage the contradiction.¹⁶ The principle originated outside the PRC's sphere of involvement at the time, in the 1975 Helsinki Act,¹⁷ and was later used in the 1990 Charter for a new Europe¹⁸ and the 1997 Founding Act on Mutual Relations Cooperation and Security.¹⁹ The heart of the principle is that the security of one country should not be satisfied at the cost of others.²⁰ Significantly, Russia believes that the principle was agreed to in the 1999 European Security Charter and 2010 Astana Declaration, to which the United States is a signatory.²¹ It is straightforward to see the contradiction embodied in the principle, as illustrated in the Ukraine dispute. On the one hand, Ukraine believes that Russia's adherence to these agreements means it must respect the sovereignty of Ukraine,²² while Russia contends that the threat of NATO expansionism threatens its security and thus the collective concept of the indestructible security.²³ For the PRC, at times when there is no conflict, the

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16. *'Indivisible Security Principle' Established by the OSCE Should Be Put into Practice: Chinese Envoy to the UN Concerning Ukraine*, GLOB. TIMES (Mar. 15, 2022, 11:12 AM), <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1254890.shtml> [<https://perma.cc/2Z2T-CD85>].
 17. Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe: Final Act, at 3, Aug. 1, 1975, 14 I.L.M. 1292 [hereinafter Final Act].
 18. Charter of Paris for a New Europe, at 5, Nov. 21, 1990, 30 I.L.M. 190 [hereinafter Paris Charter].
 19. Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation § 1, May 16, 1997, 36 I.L.M. 1006.
 20. See Paris Charter, *supra* note 18, at 5.
 21. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE): Charter for European Security § 2, Nov. 19, 1999, 39 I.L.M. 255; Astana Commemorative Declaration Towards a Security Community ¶ 1, Dec. 3, 2010, 21 SEC. & HUM. RTS. 265.
 22. See Jacob Lassin & Emily Channell-Justice, *Why Putin Has Such a Hard Time Accepting Ukrainian Sovereignty*, THE CONVERSATION (Dec. 21, 2021, 4:20 PM), <https://theconversation.com/why-putin-has-such-a-hard-time-accepting-ukrainian-sovereignty-174029> [<https://perma.cc/DJG5-RCKY>].
 23. See Martina et al., *supra* note 5.

contradiction can remain more apparent than real. But Russia's invasion of Ukraine has removed that device and has led to demands that the PRC take a clearer stance.²⁴

By tracking the narrative approach PRC state-backed media take toward the Russia-Ukraine conflict, we can assess how, in light of this contradiction and the lack of an obvious policy stance on Ukraine, the PRC's choice in narrative evolves over time. Importantly, by tracking the PRC's evolving rhetoric we can gain insights into the PRC's evolving policy objectives vis-à-vis the conflict, and into the PRC's wider foreign policy goals.

*B. The PRC's Use of International Social Media for Online
Influence*

The PRC has extensively used a wide variety of information control tools to manipulate public opinion both domestically and, more recently, internationally. In the 1990s the PRC became aware of the need to increase its international influence efforts in response to: (1) strong international criticism of the PRC's handling of the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989;²⁵ and (2) the emergence of the "China Threat Theory" which positioned the PRC as a rising world power seeking to upset the international order.²⁶ In response to these threats, the Chinese Communist Party created the State Council Information Office, also referred to as the Office of Foreign Propaganda, to broadcast a favorable image of the PRC's foreign policies toward international audiences.²⁷

These international influence efforts are intended to enable the CCP to directly influence international narratives surrounding Chinese culture and the PRC's foreign policies.²⁸

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24. See *China's Position on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, U.S.-CHINA ECON. & SEC. COMM'N (Oct. 27, 2022), <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-position-russias-invasion-ukraine> [<https://perma.cc/8E3H-UVWF>].
25. See ANNE-MARIE BRADY, *MARKETING DICTATORSHIP: PROPAGANDA AND THOUGHT WORK IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA* 3-4 (2009).
26. Yiwei Wang, *Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese Soft Power*, 616 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 257, 258 (2008).
27. BRADY, *supra* note 25, at 23.
28. Anne-Marie Brady, *China in Xi's "New Era": New Zealand and the CCP'S "Magic Weapons"*, 29 J. DEMOCRACY 68, 68-69 (2018).

Ultimately, these efforts are a means to “increase China’s soft power” and make the PRC “a socialist cultural superpower”.²⁹ Underpinning these efforts is the PRC’s pursuit of international status and respect among other states, alongside a desire to combat critical international opinions.³⁰

The international broadcasting tools used by the PRC as part of its online influence efforts are multifaceted and include the use of inauthentic social media accounts³¹ and state-backed media outlets³², among other strategies.³³ A Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development announced in 2006 declared that the CCP sought to develop “strong propaganda methods and strong propaganda capabilities.”³⁴ Initial online influence efforts prioritized developing these propaganda capabilities through the creation of international state-backed media outlets in a variety of languages.³⁵

This article identifies the narratives that PRC state-backed media outlets are attempting to project to international audiences through the social media platform Facebook. Previous scholarship has identified two main narrative approaches used by PRC state-backed media targeted toward international audiences. The first narrative aims to frame the PRC in a positive light as a responsible world power, capable of global leadership.³⁶ The

29. David Shambaugh, *China’s Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect*, 94 FOREIGN AFFS., July-Aug. 2015, at 99, 99.

30. YONG DENG, CHINA’S STRUGGLE FOR STATUS: THE REALIGNMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS 21 (2008).

31. Farid Alsabeh, *Chinese Bots and Their Role in the Hong Kong Protests*, MEDIUM (Sept. 19, 2019) <https://falsabeh.medium.com/google-news-09-18-chinese-bots-and-their-role-in-the-hong-kong-protests-dec47191517> [<https://perma.cc/HG5G-5AV9>]; Marcel Schliebs et al., *China’s Public Diplomacy Operations: Understanding Engagement and Inauthentic Amplification of PRC Diplomats on Facebook and Twitter 1* (Programme on Democracy & Tech., Working Paper, Paper No. 2021.1 2021).

32. Shambaugh, *supra* note 29, at 102.

33. *Id.* at 104.

34. CRAIG HAYDEN, THE RHETORIC OF SOFT POWER: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS 175 (2012).

35. Shambaugh, *supra* note 29, 102-03.

36. See Jeff Kao & Mia Shuang Li, *How China Built a Twitter Propaganda Machine Then Let It Loose on Coronavirus*,

second strikes a more negative, sometimes aggressive, nationalist tone and is focused on countering the West, and in particular, the United States.³⁷ While the first narrative is designed to convince international audiences to view the PRC more positively, the second is indirectly intended feed nationalist sentiment within a domestic PRC audience.³⁸ PRC state-backed international narratives are both influenced by, and feed back into, domestic discourse.³⁹ This domestic discourse is strongly nationalist.⁴⁰ As such, the PRC's international state-backed media narratives alternate between these two narratives. Little is known, however, about why and how PRC state-backed media choose between these two narrative approaches, and how effective these narratives are at influencing international online audiences.⁴¹

This article uses data from PRC state-backed media posts on Facebook on the topic of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to understand how PRC state-backed media alternate between these two narratives, and how Facebook users respond to these narratives. Given the contradiction between PRC support for Russia and the PRC's assertion that Ukraine has territorial sovereignty and PRC's the lack of a consistent policy stance on Ukraine, this case is an opportunity to explore which narrative approach the PRC prioritizes in its international rhetoric.

PROPUBLICA (Mar. 26, 2020, 5:00 AM), <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-china-built-a-twitter-propaganda-machine-then-let-it-loose-on-coronavirus> [<https://perma.cc/LXV5-VEHU>].

37. *See id.*

38. See Wang Yi (王毅), 深入学习贯彻习近平外交思想 不断开创中国特色大国外交新局面 [In-depth Study and Implementation of Xi Jinping's Diplomatic Thought, and Continue to Create a New Situation in Major-country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics], CPCNEWS (Aug. 3, 2020, 2:03 PM), <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0803/c64094-31808409.html> [<https://perma.cc/C8T8-NDJD>].

39. *See id.*

40. PETER HAYS GRIES, CHINA'S NEW NATIONALISM: PRIDE, POLITICS, AND DIPLOMACY 136 (2004).

41. *See, e.g.*, Björn Jerdén, *The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It*, 7 CHINESE J. INT'L POL. 47, 47-49 (2014); Ja Ian Chong, *Popular Narratives Versus Chinese History: Implications for Understanding an Emergent China*, 20 EUR. J. INT'L RELS. 939, 940 (2014).

II. DATA

This article posits that Facebook posts by PRC state-backed media offer a means to gauge the PRC's framing of the war in Ukraine toward international audiences. To this end, I construct a dataset of all Facebook posts mentioning Ukraine by PRC state-backed media between January 2020 and June 2022. This time period allows for a segmentation of the analysis into four periods: (1) the two years preceding Russia's invasion of Ukraine; (2) the weeks immediately preceding the invasion on the twenty-fourth of February 2022; (3) the month of March 2022 which follows the invasion; and (4) the subsequent months as the war continued into summer 2022.

The Facebook accounts included in this analysis consist of the accounts managed by any PRC state-backed media outlet that satisfy the following criteria: (1) the account targets an international audience; (2) the outlet discusses world news and does not focus on a specific region or topic; and (3) the account posts in English. The PRC state-backed media outlet accounts that meet these requirements are: *China Xinhua News*,⁴² *CGTN*,⁴³ *Global Times*,⁴⁴ *China Daily*,⁴⁵ *People's Daily*,⁴⁶ *CCTV*,⁴⁷ and *China.org.cn*.⁴⁸ I use Facebook's CrowdTangle API⁴⁹ to collect the

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42. China Xinhua News, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/XinhuaNewsAgency/> [<https://perma.cc/J6EA-MLLV>].
 43. CGTN, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaGlobalTVNetwork/> [<https://perma.cc/A7RP-L39M>].
 44. Global Times, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/globaltimesnews/> [<https://perma.cc/NWD8-7DM5>].
 45. China Daily, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/chinadaily/> [<https://perma.cc/45QF-UZNW>].
 46. People's Daily, China, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/PeoplesDaily/> [<https://perma.cc/T6PJ-34DW>].
 47. CCTV, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/cctvcom/> [<https://perma.cc/8NW2-ZQUA>].
 48. China.org.cn., FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/chinaorgcn/> [<https://perma.cc/EQ2G-8F4Y>].
 49. *See generally About Us*, CROWDTANGLE, <https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/4201940-about-us> [<https://perma.cc/44PW-Q2ZW>].

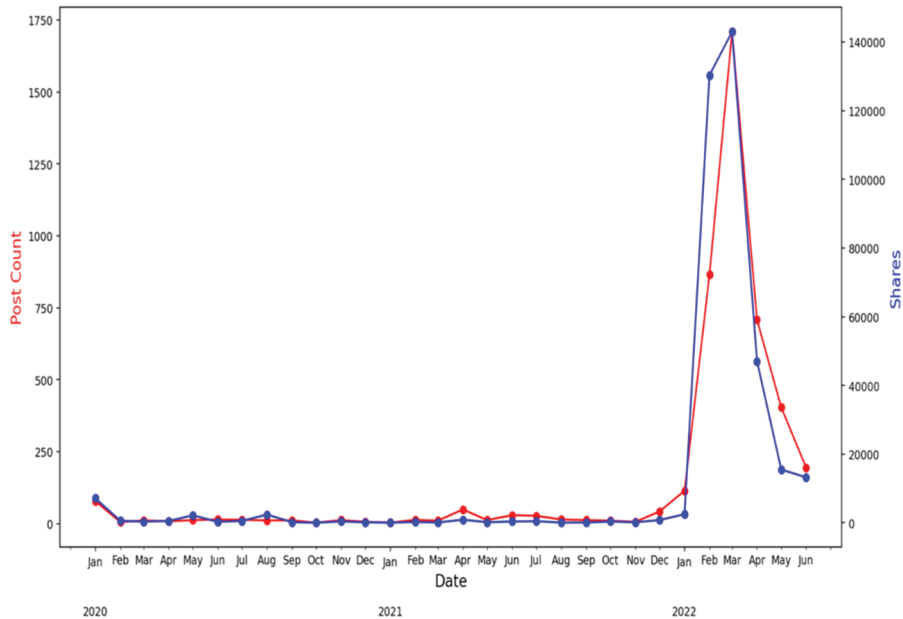
all the posts by these outlet accounts between January 2020 and June 2022. From these accounts I then extract all posts mentioning the word “Ukraine.” These amount to 4,405 posts.⁵⁰ These data contain the Facebook post text as well as the user shares received by each of these posts.

In *Figure 1*, I plot in red the frequency with which the PRC state-backed media accounts mention Ukraine in their Facebook posts between January 2020 and June 2022. These Facebook posts mentioning Ukraine comprise what might be thought of as the framing of the PRC’s narrative with respect to Ukraine. Alongside this narrative is the question of its effectiveness; that is, how often do Facebook users share these posts, thereby amplifying the original narrative as given by PRC state-backed outlets? Specifically, as a Facebook share amplifies a post to a wider audience, shares are a good measure for amplification.⁵¹ In blue, I plot the total number of shares these posts received. Both the Facebook post counts and numbers of shares for these posts are plotted by month.

50. *See infra* Figure 1.

51. *See* Andrew Hutchinson, *Internal Research from Facebook Shows that Re-Shares Can Significantly Amplify Misinformation*, SOC. MEDIA TODAY (Nov. 5, 2021), <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/internal-research-from-facebook-shows-that-re-shares-can-significantly-ampl/609614/> [<https://perma.cc/ZT6T-YTEC>].

Figure 1: Total Facebook Posts Mentioning ‘Ukraine’ by PRC State-Backed Media, and User Shares of these Posts, From January 2020 to June 2022



Source: Data gathered by the author from the Facebook CrowdTangle API on July 9, 2022.

Note: Post count and shares are calculated as the total posts from Chinese state-backed media accounts and user shares of these posts per month.

Figure 1 illustrates that, prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, PRC state-backed media outlets mention Ukraine in their Facebook posts infrequently, at a rate of about 17 posts per month.⁵² The number of posts begins to increase in January 2022—114 posts⁵³—probably reflecting growing awareness of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border.⁵⁴ It further increases to

52. *See infra* Figure 1.

53. *Id.*

54. *See* Meghan Bobrowsky, *Russian Invasion Unfolds on Social Media*, WALL ST. J. (Feb. 24, 2022, 2:13 PM), <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news/card/russian-invasion->

865 posts in February as the invasion began, and reaches a peak of 1,709 posts in March.⁵⁵ There is then a rapid decline in posts in the months that follows.⁵⁶

The pattern in the number of shares received by these posts broadly matches the frequency of the posts. From 797 shares in December 2021 the number of shares peaks at 142,959 in March 2022.⁵⁷ These numbers are however not sustained, falling to 13,224 shares in June 2022.⁵⁸

At face value, *Figure 1* appears to tell a simple story of a spike in Facebook mentions of Ukraine by PRC state-backed outlets, which peaks in the month immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Two events at least superficially appear to be significant in terms of the timing and fit with the evidence in *Figure 1*. First, Xi Jinping met with Vladimir Putin on the fourth of February at the start of the Winter Olympics and the two issued a joint statement calling on the West to "abandon its ideologized cold war approaches" and that the bonds between the PRC and Russia had "no limits" with "no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation."⁵⁹ Second, on the eighteenth of March, Xi Jinping had a video call with Joe Biden to exchange views on the situation in Ukraine. As reported in the summary of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "President Xi pointed out that China does not want to see the situation in Ukraine to come to this. China stands for peace and opposes war. This is embedded in China's history and culture."⁶⁰ In conclusion, the Chinese Foreign Ministry reported that the two leaders "directed their teams to promptly follow up and take concrete actions to put China-US relations

unfolds-on-social-media-Ao4mZi1jqcc29AYpRLGe
[<https://perma.cc/2X9T-HRMR>].

55. *See supra* Figure 1.

56. *Id.*

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.*

59. Russia and PRC Joint Statement, *supra* note 6.

60. *President Xi Jinping Has a Video Call with US President Joe Biden*, MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFS. OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (Mar. 19, 2022, 12:21 PM), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220319_10653207.html [<https://perma.cc/Z3FW-JK86>].

back on the track of steady development, and make respective efforts for the proper settlement of the Ukraine crisis.”⁶¹

It is notable, but on the basis of this evidence alone, not causal, that the volume of communication from PRC state-backed media on Facebook escalates following the Xi-Putin meeting in early February, though February was also the month in which the invasion began, but then falls sharply following the Xi-Biden video call.⁶² Volume is a simple but important measure of the PRC’s use of rhetoric as a tool to attempt to influence international audiences. But there is likely to be more to the story. With two such abrupt shifts in the volume of rhetoric on Ukraine, it is important to examine the content of these Facebook posts systematically in order to assess whether the PRC’s narratives change alongside these volume shifts.

III. METHOD

To understand narratives at scale, social scientists typically adopt either a qualitative or quantitative approach.⁶³ A qualitative approach would entail extracting a *sample* of documents, and gauging the narratives contained within these documents.⁶⁴ This approach assumes that the narratives contained within this sample will scale consistently to the entire dataset of documents. A qualitative approach, however, would not guarantee an accurate representation of the granular detail of the entire population of documents, as much would hinge on the method of sampling.⁶⁵

Instead, I adopt an approach which systematically captures the entire population of the documents, and not just a sample. This population of documents is then subjected to analysis using a topic model. Topic models are a form of unsupervised machine

61. *Id.*

62. *See id.*; Russia and PRC Joint Statement, *supra* note 6; Matthew Mpoke Bigg & Ben Shpigel, *Ukraine Says It Will Help Civilians Leave Kherson*, N.Y. TIMES, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/11/20/world/russia-ukraine-war-news> (Nov. 22, 2022) [<https://perma.cc/A8BW-WAHD>]; *see also supra* Figure 1.

63. JANE ELLIOT, USING NARRATIVE IN SOCIAL RESEARCH 1 (2005).

64. JOHN W. CRESWELL, QUALITATIVE INQUIRY AND RESEARCH DESIGN: CHOOSING AMONG FIVE APPROACHES 66 (2d ed. 2006).

65. ELLIOT, *supra* note 63, at 22.

learning that cluster word groupings within a corpus (or body of text) of documents to form groups.⁶⁶ These groupings are called topics.⁶⁷ Topic models have become a popular and widely used tool within the social sciences for uncovering prevalent topics within large bodies of text.⁶⁸

In this paper I use a Structural Topic Model to analyse the narratives contained within the 4,405 PRC state-backed outlet Facebook posts mentioning Ukraine.⁶⁹ There are two reasons for this choice of topic model. First, because the STM function operates similarly to a correlated topic model, it has better predictive power and correlation structure relative to the more commonly used Latent Dirichlet Topic Model.⁷⁰ Second, the STM performs well on short documents, such as Tweets or Facebook posts;⁷¹ and as Facebook posts comprise the data for this paper, the STM is thus the model of choice. In this paper I use an STM to quantify the shift in PRC state-backed media outlets during the outbreak of war in Ukraine. More specifically, I identify which topics are particularly prevalent during the four key time periods outlined in the *Data* section above.

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66. Robin M. Snyder, *An Introduction to Topic Modeling as an Unsupervised Machine Learning Way to Organize Text Information*, ASS'N SUPPORTING COMPUT. USERS IN EDUC. PROC., June 14, 2015, at 86, 86, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED571275.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/2365-CCTZ>].
 67. *Id.* at 90.
 68. See, e.g., Sung Eun Kim, *Media Bias against Foreign Firms as a Veiled Trade Barrier: Evidence from Chinese Newspapers*, 2018 AM. POL. SCI. REV. 954, 966 (2018); Carsten Schwemmer & Sandra Ziewiecki, *Social Media Sellout: The Increasing Role of Product Promotion on YouTube*, 2018 SOC. MEDIA + SOC'Y 4, 7 (2018); Jacob E. Rothschild et al., *Pigeonholing Partisans: Stereotypes of Party Supporters and Partisan Polarization*, 41 POL. BEHAV. 423, 429 (2019).
 69. See generally Margaret E. Roberts et al., *The Structural Topic Model and Applied Social Science*, NEURAL INFO. PROCESSING SYS. PROC., 2013, at 1, 1-2, <https://scholar.princeton.edu/files/bstewart/files/stmnips2013.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/MUG6-JK4K>].
 70. David M. Blei & John D. Lafferty, *A Correlated Topic Model of Science*, 1 ANNALS APPLIED STATS. 17, 20-22 (2007).
 71. See generally Alan Mishler et al., *Using Structural Topic Modeling to Detect Events and Cluster Twitter Users in the Ukrainian Crisis*, in 528 COMMUNICATIONS IN COMPUTER AND INFORMATION SCIENCE 639, 639-640 (2015).

A topic model requires the researcher to choose the number of topics for their dataset, referred to as the K value.⁷² To determine an appropriate K value, I first plot a series of diagnostic statistics, including the residuals, the likelihood of held-out datasets, and the semantic coherence of a series of K options.⁷³ I then manually assess the coherency and distinction of the characteristic words within each topic for a range of K values. From this, I arrive at a K value of 25 topics. Having established a suitable K number of topics, I then manually assign each topic a title which summarises the contents of that topic. Following standard procedure in topic modelling, I assign these titles based on the most characteristic words and documents for each topic.⁷⁴ For example, for the topic “Russian Leadership” the most characteristic words are “russian, putin, president, said, vladimir, foreign, minister.” Similarly, for the topic “Ukrainian Refugees” the most characteristic words are “refugees, poland, border, conflict, million, ukrainians, russia, ukraine”. For topics where the characteristic words are more ambiguous, I examine the characteristic documents, which provide contextual information.

Using the STM with 25 topics, I analyse in their entirety the content of the 4,405 PRC state-backed media posts mentioning Ukraine.⁷⁵ Over the time period from January 2020 and June 2022, I obtain 25 topics which are listed as follows: *civilian stories in Ukraine; cultural exchanges and diplomacy; Russian leadership; UN Security Council and multilateral action; President Emmanuel Macron; China's humanitarian aid; the US; effects of the war on specific Ukrainian cities; sanctions; military escalation; infrastructure vulnerabilities and damage; global food*

72. *Topic Modeling*, SUMMER INST. IN COMPUTATIONAL SOC. SCI., https://sicss.io/2019/materials/day3-text-analysis/topic-modeling/rmarkdown/Topic_Modeling.html [<https://perma.cc/5FCJ-NFZD>].

73. Pirkko Pietiläinen, *Properties of Semantic Coherence Measures - Case of Topic Models*, in SEMAPRO 2020: THE FOURTEENTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ADVANCES IN SEMANTIC PROCESSING 36, 36 (2020).

74. See generally Xanda Schofield, *Choose Your Words Wisely (for Topic Models)*, CORNELL UNIV., <https://blogs.cornell.edu/cornellnlp/2019/02/09/choose-your-words-wisely-for-topic-models/> [<https://perma.cc/6ZJU-EF89>].

75. Notably, for any given post the mention of Ukraine (or Ukrainian) may occur more than once.

prices; Israel-Palestine; Ukraine refugees; Iran downing Ukrainian airliner; peace talks and military developments; global economy; statements by China's spokespeople; Ukrainian government; criticising the continuation of war; the European Union; NATO expansionism; conspiracies; Mariupol; and escalating geopolitical tensions.

The next step in the analysis entails assessing how these 25 topics vary over time. This variation over time enables us to better understand the changing narrative on Ukraine by the PRC's state-backed media, and thereby address the question of how the PRC manages its policy contradiction.

To assess change over time, I assign each Facebook post to a topic. For each post, the STM calculates a distribution for that post over all the topics within the topic model. Using this calculation, I assign each post to the topic for which it has the highest probability. Each of the posts in each time period is therefore allocated to a topic. I am then able to rank the frequency of occurrence of each topic in each time period. In the following section I use this topic frequency analysis, alongside a contextual assessment of representative Facebook posts from particularly prevalent topics, to evaluate the PRC's shifting narrative on Ukraine.

IV. ANALYSIS

As discussed above, the analysis focuses on four time periods: (1) the two years preceding Russia's invasion of Ukraine; (2) the weeks immediately preceding the invasion on the twenty-fourth of February 2022; (3) the month of March 2022 which follows the invasion; and (4) subsequent months as the war continued into summer 2022. This periodization allows us to gauge the changing dynamic in the PRC's narrative vis-à-vis Ukraine using a research design which properly captures the pre- and post-event change in narrative, as well as more granular shifts in the immediate lead-up and the immediate aftermath of the invasion. *Tables 1 through 4* present the top ten topics identified by the STM model during each of the time periods. The ranking of these topics is given by the number of PRC state-backed media Facebook posts for which that topic is dominant.

Table 1: Top Ten Topics from PRC State-Backed Media Facebook Posts in the Two Years Leading up to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Date	Topic Label	Number of Posts	Total Shares
2020 and 2021	Iran Downing Ukrainian Airliner	93	8053
2020 and 2021	Ukrainian Government	34	492
2020 and 2021	President Vladimir Putin	27	405
2020 and 2021	Cultural Exchanges and Diplomacy	27	549
2020 and 2021	China's Humanitarian Aid	26	1256
2020 and 2021	President Emmanuel Macron	25	664
2020 and 2021	The US	23	518
2020 and 2021	Military Escalation	23	346
2020 and 2021	Ukrainian Cities	17	634
2020 and 2021	The European Union	16	203
2020 and 2021	Statements By China's Spokespeople	16	194

Source: Calculations by the author using data gathered from Facebook CrowdTangle API on July 9, 2022.

Note: The topics are ordered by number of posts with the three most shared topics given in **bold**.

In *Table 1* we note that for the two years of 2020 and 2021, the maximum number of posts on a given topic is 93, which focuses the downing of the Ukrainian airliner by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in January 2020.⁷⁶ On the

76. Madeline Holcombe et al., *Iran Admits to Shooting Down Ukrainian Passenger Plane Unintentionally*, CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/11/middleeast/iran-shot-down-ukrainian->

question of relations between Russia and Ukraine, the second and third topics along with the topic of “Military Escalation,” tied at eighth, are of interest. On “Ukrainian Government” however, the focus is not indicative of an anticipated invasion, but rather on the footwear of female Ukrainian soldiers,⁷⁷ and conflicts between the Ukrainian Prime Minister and President.⁷⁸ To investigate the content of the Facebook posts within this topic during this time period, I examine the most representative Facebook posts for key topics of interest. Here, a representative Facebook post refers to the post with the highest probability of belonging to that topic for the time period of study. As illustration, the first sentence of the representative Facebook posts for the topic “Ukrainian Government” during this time period are:

These #Ukrainian soldiers have been practicing twice daily in high-heeled shoes to march in an August parade in Kyiv that will celebrate the country’s 30th anniversary of independence . . . ,⁷⁹

and,

Ukrainian parliament accepts Prime Minister Oleksiy Honcharuk’s request for resignation: State-run news agency Ukrinform Honcharuk issued his resignation following a leaked audio recording of him reportedly criticizing

plane/index.html (Jan. 11, 2020, 6:35 PM) [<https://perma.cc/Y7QE-U5G4>].

77. See generally Rob Picheta and Denis Lapin, *Ukraine to Give Female Soldiers ‘More Comfortable’ Heels After Sexism Controversy*, CNN July 8, 2021, 8:34 AM), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/08/europe/ukraine-female-soldiers-new-heels-scl-intl/index.html> [<https://perma.cc/GQH3-XX27>].
78. See Isabelle Khurshudyan, *Ukraine’s Zelensky Replaces Prime Minister in Second Government Shake-up in a Month*, WASH. POST (Mar. 4, 2020, 10:20 AM), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraines-zelensky-replaces-prime-minister-in-second-government-shake-up-in-a-month/2020/03/04/2106bc50-5d87-11ea-ac50-18701e14e06d_story.html [<https://perma.cc/YB9W-A2N2>].
79. CGTN, *Female Soldiers in Ukraine Required to Paraded in High Heels*, FACEBOOK (July 6, 2021), <https://m.facebook.com/ChinaGlobalTVNetwork/photos/a.566725090034982/6560480773992687/> [<https://perma.cc/4AU9-LLEL>].

President Volodymyr Zelensky's understanding of the economy . . . ⁸⁰

For the topic on Putin, the representative PRC state-backed media Facebook post with the highest probability for this topic is:

Russia's President Vladimir Putin said on Friday that neighboring Ukraine was becoming 'anti-Russia' and that Moscow would be ready to react to what he said were threats to its own security.⁸¹

For the topic on "Military Escalation", the most representative post for this topic is:

Russia is building up troops and military equipment along the Ukraine border. Ukrainian Ambassador and American University History professor Anton Fedyashin discuss the escalating tensions between the two countries.⁸²

While these posts discuss the growing hostility of Russia towards Ukraine, two points are worth noting. First, the tone is one of reporting rather than taking of a side by the PRC. Second, the number of posts for these two topics are only 12% of the total 411 Facebook posts by the PRC on Ukraine over this time period.⁸³ Notably, the vast number of Facebook posts which were shared were on the topic Iran's downing of the Ukrainian airline, and not on Ukrainian-Russian relations. This topic received 8,053

80. China Xinhua News, Post on Ukrainian Prime Minister's Resignation, FACEBOOK (Mar. 4, 2020), <https://www.facebook.com/XinhuaNewsAgency/photos/a.338115926215858/377804702556047> [<https://perma.cc/FT7Q-K4BT>].

81. CGTNEurope, *Ukraine Becoming an 'Anti-Russia' Says Putin, Pledging a Response*, FACEBOOK (May 14, 2021), <https://www.facebook.com/cgtneuropeofficial/posts/pfbid0mSBxaZAsPE48yUpoxFSXhQXHLyNpzuQCVp4YcRoEMCWIKsQdoNn66AbLGXdn4Rl> [<https://perma.cc/39P2-DW3N>].

82. CGTN, *Tensions Between Ukraine and Russia After Military Build-up*, FACEBOOK (Apr. 15, 2021), <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=302151011382109&ref=sharing> [<https://perma.cc/225U-FMCU>].

83. See *supra* Table 1.

user shares, and the next highest topic in terms of shares was on China's humanitarian aid with 1,256 shares.⁸⁴

From the topics and posts during this period, I conclude that PRC state-backed media was more focused more on reporting events and developments rather than expressing judgements which might expose the apparent contradiction of its own policy stance.

Table 2: Top Ten Topics from State-Backed Facebook Posts in the Weeks Leading up to the Russian Invasion.

Date	Topic Label	Number of Posts	Total Shares
Jan 2022	Military Escalation	22	873
Jan 2022	Russian Leadership	16	351
Jan 2022	Escalating Geopolitical Tensions	13	256
Jan 2022	Statements by China's Spokespeople	10	50
Jan 2022	The US	8	138
Jan 2022	UN Security Council and Multilateral Action	8	101
Jan 2022	The European Union	7	82
Jan 2022	Sanctions	5	80
Jan 2022	Global Economy	5	102
Jan 2022	Infrastructure Vulnerabilities and Damage	4	10

Feb 2022	Effects of the War on Specific Ukrainian Cities	93	57714
Feb 2022	Statements by China's Spokespeople	88	2186
Feb 2022	Russian Leadership	73	2318

84. *Id.*

Feb 2022	UN Security Council and Multilateral Action	70	4620
Feb 2022	Peace Talks and Military Developments	63	12885
Feb 2022	Ukrainian Government	61	9815
Feb 2022	The US	45	1798
Feb 2022	Escalating Geopolitical Tensions	42	7224
Feb 2022	NATO Expansionism	38	7468
Feb 2022	Sanctions	33	1180

Source: Calculations by the author using data gathered from Facebook CrowdTangle API on July 9 2022.

Note: The topics are ordered by number of posts with the three most shared topics given in **bold**.

Table 2 lists the ten most prevalent topics for each of January and February 2022, leading up to the Russian invasion on the twenty-fourth of February. Examining the top three topics for each month, there is evidence that the PRC shaped its narrative in a way that skirted the tension between supporting Russia and defending Ukraine's right to territorial sovereignty. It did so in the weeks leading up to the invasion by offering a largely factual depiction of the growing tension between Russia and Ukraine but at the same time highlighting the role for a peaceful resolution.⁸⁵ The latter tactic coincides with the second goal of PRC foreign policy, namely to project itself as a responsible actor in the broader international community.

85. See CCTNEurope, Post on Military Hardware and Personnel Movement in Ukraine, FACEBOOK (Jan. 21, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=515193426479225> [<https://perma.cc/UR2M-MXKN>]; CGTNEurope, *Ukraine Civilians Train with Military Amid Russia Invasion*, FACEBOOK (Jan. 18, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/cgtneuropeofficial/p2osts/pfbid026fShDSATjTqRfGoHAKoMyjbqYW5CeSfBFFKpSvKet61a6WNujgDYFAPDccXFsaHPl> [<https://perma.cc/Y6ML-WSPU>]; CGTNEurope, Post on Ukraine Diplomatic Talks, FACEBOOK (Feb. 11, 2022), https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=300358645409945 [<https://perma.cc/S8SA-4QJH>].

The factual representation of the escalation can be seen, for example, in the top three topics for January 2022. In January, PRC state-backed media discuss the topic “Military Escalation” in 22 posts.⁸⁶ Of these, the most representative post for this topic reads as follows:

Life on the Ukraine/Russia border RUUA 📍 Accompanied by a cat, a military forces serviceman smokes in a dugout. 📍 Ukrainian fighters walk along the line of separation from pro-Russian rebels. 📍 A soldier takes a moment of rest with a dog at his feet. 📍 A serviceman walks past a mannequin in a deep trench.⁸⁷

The above post is accompanied by a series of photographs. The most representative post for the topic on military escalation in January 2022 is:

A total of 20 Russian warships have started drills in the Baltic Sea, after NATO decided to send additional ships and fighters to Eastern Europe amid escalated tensions in and around Ukraine.⁸⁸

The second ranked topic is “Russian Leadership,” which discusses individual Russian leaders, but does not exhibit an obvious bias.⁸⁹ This is exemplified by the most representative post:

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken held a phone conversation on Tuesday to discuss Moscow’s proposal for security

86. *See supra* Table 2.

87. CGTNEurope, *Life on the Ukraine/Russia Border*, FACEBOOK (Jan. 25, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/cgtneuropeofficial/posts/pfbid02oT9p6PbLEa2sszxNcopD1xWGVvvaqqDmsrSfsLUej7WNiZ7raZ36pd5zb57VbY1n7l> [<https://perma.cc/AED7-EZ6F>].

88. China Xinhau News, *Russia Conducts Large-scale Drills in Baltic Sea Amid Ukraine Tensions*, FACEBOOK (Jan. 24, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/XinhuaNewsAgency/posts/pfbid0PuNWmp8udyonsE96fQAZbMre9PwAv79eLQXDRSX8A1WQPGzgEJGHw1yYv5WrwpgDI> [<https://perma.cc/DNF4-TCQW>].

89. *See supra* Table 2.

guarantees between Russia and the West, and the situation in Ukraine.⁹⁰

Indeed, the lack of clear bias towards Russia can also be seen in the third ranked topic “Escalating Geopolitical Tensions”,⁹¹ where the post with the highest probability for this topic is:

The US on Friday accused Russia of planning covert operations, including sabotage, in eastern Ukraine in an effort to create a “pretext for invasion.”⁹²

Turning to February, the factual narrative continues to dominate PRC state-backed media posts. For instance, the top ranked topic, “Effects of the War on Specific Ukrainian Cities” uses video footage to capture life within Ukrainian cities under attack from Russia. The most representative posts for this topic are:

#Exclusive Video filmed by CGTN stringer in Ukraine’s Kyiv area shows local buildings ablaze while artillery fire is heard in the background.⁹³

and,

#Exclusive Anton Dyachenko, a Ukrainian YouTuber, has filmed an exchange of fire between Ukrainian and Russian

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90. CCTV, *Lavrov, Blinken Discuss Security Guarantees, Ukraine Over Phone*, FACEBOOK (Jan. 18, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/cctvcom/posts/pfbid0icGLzMK9uAGMj9tqbRWFpToSD1zazs9Yh7fvE9aQeGpPFeswXLDKi5XU3355WwPD1> [https://perma.cc/4DYD-K36P].
91. *See supra* Table 2.
92. Peoples Daily, China, Post on US Accusing Russia of Covert Operations, FACEBOOK (Jan. 14, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/PeoplesDaily/posts/pfbid02dyVrSN1dkVXaiX6iR73xRbiNotMpNdE4aHxAiEDUEaAkDq91qrUyAR13FL8g9B4vl> [https://perma.cc/23FC-VRHD].
93. CGTN, Post on Live War in Ukraine, FACEBOOK (Feb. 24, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaGlobalTVNetwork/posts/pfbid02hGqM7SJnFtFLGYZiM8TKNFc6JQMycLUyLcqj9nM6gttvc6ZhSn5XcCNCBcqgSVg1l> [https://perma.cc/E5HG-SAJU].

forces on his way back to the city center of Kharkiv in #Ukraine. He authorized this exclusive footage to CGTN.⁹⁴

Unusually, across all the top topics in all time periods (*Tables 1 through 4*), this topic, which uses video footage, is the one that receives the highest number of user shares, with 57,714.⁹⁵

The second ranked topic in February is “Statements by China’s Spokespeople.”⁹⁶ This topic appears in the previous month as the fourth ranked topic with ten posts and fifty shares.⁹⁷ But in just a few weeks the prevalence of this topic increases markedly with eighty-eight posts by PRC state-backed media. Posts about this topic receive 2,186 shares in February.⁹⁸ The key theme which appears in this topic is the importance of a peaceful resolution and the PRC’s role in facilitating this resolution. Again, this illustrates the PRC’s goal of appearing to act as a responsible international actor:

Chinese Foreign Ministry on Tuesday called on all parties on the #Ukraine issue to remain calm, ease tensions and resolve differences through dialogue and negotiation. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin made the remarks at a daily press briefing.⁹⁹

And,

Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Saturday held a telephone conversation with German

94. CGTN, *CGTN Exclusive: Man Films Exchange of Fire Between Ukrainian, Russian Forces*, FACEBOOK (Feb. 28, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaGlobalTVNetwork/videos/476308607489120/> [https://perma.cc/NKW7-MD8K].

95. *See supra* Table 2.

96. *Id.*

97. *Id.*

98. *Id.*

99. China Daily, Post on Chinese Foreign Ministry on Ukraine, FACEBOOK (Feb. 22, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/chinadaily/photos/a.195840701290/10160037216111291> [https://perma.cc/9VLC-ZFNR].

Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, during which they exchanged views on the current situation in Ukraine.¹⁰⁰

The topic “Russian Leadership” is again evident in the top three PRC state-backed media topics in February and appears to hint at a softening narrative vis-à-vis Russia, particularly in the second illustrative post below where Putin and Lavrov are reported to have no foreign bank accounts for which the Western sanctions may apply. The two most representative posts for this topic are as follows:

Moscow is preparing for negotiations with “all constructive forces” on a settlement in Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Saturday in a phone call with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu.¹⁰¹

And,

Neither Russian President Vladimir Putin nor Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov have bank accounts anywhere abroad, said a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson in response to UK’s decision: Sputniknews #UkraineTensions.¹⁰²

In sum, in the weeks preceding and including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the PRC state-backed media can be seen to have adroitly skirted the contradiction between the PRC’s declaration of support for Russia and its defense of a nation’s territorial sovereignty.¹⁰³ Even so, there is evidence of an emerging

100. China.org.cn, Post on Telephone Call with German Foreign Minister, FACEBOOK (Feb. 27, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/chinaorgcn/posts/pfbid0Pyda8xDDgbUQju6tx68KcRwGCjUh8NyPz9fD8gbVoHT2Fhn582gV1GzebZVYJ51rl> [https://perma.cc/F3GV-LENQ].

101. China Xinhua News, Post on Moscow’s Preparation for Negotiations on Ukraine, FACEBOOK (Feb. 26, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/XinhuaNewsAgency/photos/a.338115926215858/6036862226341171> [https://perma.cc/VW39-YCYU].

102. Global Times, Post on Russian Leadership Bank Accounts Abroad, FACEBOOK (Feb. 28, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/globaltimesnews/photos/a.123349831079259/5034925529921640/> [https://perma.cc/C8T5-SHW4].

103. Jen Kirby, *What Chinese Media Is Saying About Russia’s Ukraine War*, VOX (Apr. 3, 2022, 8:00 AM), <https://www.vox.com/230052>

attempt to appear as a responsible international actor by urging peace and diplomacy, although the means for this is not clearly stated.¹⁰⁴

As a final remark on *Table 2*, by comparing both the numbers of posts and the number of shares for these posts, it is noteworthy that in January the top three topics the PRC state-backed media generated Facebook posted were also then the most widely shared by users. By February, however, when the PRC begins to generate more statements by its own spokespeople, these posts generate relatively far fewer shares than those for other topics such as “Effects of the War on Specific Ukrainian Cities,” “Peace Talks and Military Developments,” and other topics.

Table 3: Top 10 Topics from State-Backed Facebook Posts in the Immediate Aftermath of Russian Invasion

Date	Topic Label	Number of Posts	Total Shares
Mar 2022	Statements by China’s Spokespeople	176	5772
Mar 2022	Peace Talks and Military Developments	150	10964
Mar 2022	Ukraine Refugees	120	8601
Mar 2022	China’s Humanitarian Aid	120	6292
Mar 2022	UN Security Council and Multilateral Action	115	23943
Mar 2022	The US	101	7187
Mar 2022	Effects of the War on Specific Ukrainian Cities	100	12763
Mar 2022	Criticism of Western Involvement in the War	82	6418

95/china-russia-ukraine-war-media-censorship
[\[https://perma.cc/83AS-TP9P\]](https://perma.cc/83AS-TP9P).

104. Reuters, *China Tells EU it Will Pursue Ukraine Peace in its Own Way*, HINDUSTAN TIMES (Apr. 2, 2022 7:55 AM), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-tells-eu-it-will-pursue-ukraine-peace-in-its-own-way-101648865589020.html> [\[https://perma.cc/WZA6-Q33T\]](https://perma.cc/WZA6-Q33T).

Mar 2022	Cultural Exchanges and Diplomacy	76	5131
Mar 2022	Mariupol	72	7087

Source: Calculations by the author using data gathered from Facebook CrowdTangle API on July 9 2022.

Note: The topics are ordered by number of posts with the three most shared topics given in **bold**.

Table 3 illustrates the dominant topics in the month of March 2022, which is the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion. As was clear in *Figure 1*, March 2022 is the month where the PRC state-backed media outlets produced the largest volume of posts mentioning Ukraine.¹⁰⁵ It is also the month where these posts received the largest amount of user amplification through shares. The three most prevalent topics in this month are similar to those shown in *Table 2*.¹⁰⁶ The topics “Statements by China’s Spokespeople”, “Peace Talks and Military Developments”, and “Ukraine Refugees” all illustrate a continuation of the factual narrative that emphasises the PRC’s role as a responsible diplomatic actor.

As an example, for the topic “Statements by China’s Spokespeople” the most representative Facebook post states:

”Noting that China has clearly and comprehensively expounded its position on the Ukraine issue, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the most important point is that China is always a force to safeguard world peace.”¹⁰⁷

The most representative post for the topic on “Peace Talks and Military Developments” states:

”Live: Latest developments in Russia-Ukraine conflict As combat between both sides continues, the Russia-Ukraine crisis is at its new high, with a third round of talks expected

105. *See supra* Figure 1 and Table 3.

106. *See supra* Tables 2-3.

107. China Xinhau News, *China Stands on the Right Side of History on Ukraine Issue: FM*, FACEBOOK (Mar. 20, 2022), [https://www.facebook.com/XinhuaNewsAgency/posts/pfbid02Po9XfDR6V8cXpNdY2outgSxuKnfAYiwnsBMCYsDtKx1xYgEUirevjcGFQqnANqBrl\[https://perma.cc/U7LZ-42JU\]](https://www.facebook.com/XinhuaNewsAgency/posts/pfbid02Po9XfDR6V8cXpNdY2outgSxuKnfAYiwnsBMCYsDtKx1xYgEUirevjcGFQqnANqBrl[https://perma.cc/U7LZ-42JU]).

to take place next week. Stay tuned with CGTN for the latest developments and analysis in a special program of vertical livestreaming. #TheChatRoom #RussiaUkraine”.¹⁰⁸

While the topic on “Statements by China’s Spokespeople” receives the most attention by PRC state-backed media, and it is also the only topic to explicitly lay out the PRC’s stance on the Ukraine conflict, it does not fall within the top three most shared topics by Facebook users this month, as given by the three topics in bold. In short, while the PRC appears to have bolstered its message on its own role as a responsible diplomatic actor, Facebook users were more interested in sharing posts on the UN peace talks and the effects of the war itself on Ukrainian cities.

Table 4: Top 10 Topics from State-Backed Facebook Posts in the Months Following the Russian Invasion

Date	Topic Label	Number of Posts	Total Shares
Apr 2022	Criticising the Continuation of War	66	10689
Apr 2022	The US	60	4989
Apr 2022	Global Economy	49	1083
Apr 2022	Mariupol	47	2976
Apr 2022	NATO Expansionism	45	2666
Apr 2022	UN Security Council and Multilateral Action	42	1672
Apr 2022	Global Food Prices	40	2254
Apr 2022	Statements by China’s Spokespeople	38	1212
Apr 2022	Effects of the War on Specific Ukrainian Cities	29	2078

108. CGTN, *Live: Latest Developments in Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, FACEBOOK (Mar. 4, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaGlobalTVNetwork/videos/385290110104351> [https://perma.cc/P9XB-W957].

Apr 2022	Ukraine Refugees	28	1582
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May 2022	Criticising the Continuation of War	42	1000
May 2022	Mariupol	38	1460
May 2022	Global Food Prices	38	767
May 2022	Cultural Exchanges and Diplomacy	31	830
May 2022	Ukrainian Government	31	1748
May 2022	Russian Leadership	27	1577
May 2022	The US	25	1222
May 2022	UN Security Council and Multilateral Action	21	577
May 2022	Civilian Stories in Ukraine	20	501
May 2022	Sanctions	20	2201

Jun 2022	Criticising the Continuation of War	30	870
Jun 2022	The European Union	25	537
Jun 2022	Global Food Prices	24	1118
Jun 2022	Mariupol	19	1449
Jun 2022	Global Economy	11	1797
Jun 2022	Cultural Exchanges and Diplomacy	9	4065
Jun 2022	NATO Expansionism	7	94
Jun 2022	Sanctions	7	246

Jun 2022	Ukrainian Government	7	436
Jun 2022	Russian Leadership	6	869

Source: Calculations by the author using data gathered from Facebook CrowdTangle API on July 9 2022.

Note: The topics are ordered by number of posts with the three most shared topics given in **bold**.

Table 4 covers the period from April to June 2022 in which, as *Figure 1* illustrated, there is a decline in both posts and shares. In terms of content, these months are also notable for key differences from the preceding periods. The most discussed topics by PRC state-backed media are no longer descriptive or diplomatic.¹⁰⁹ Instead, in each of the three months from April, criticising the continuation of the war and the role of Western nations, and most specifically the US, is the leading topic in terms of post volume.¹¹⁰ It is also notable that for the first time there is a focus on the economic consequences of the war, namely through the impact on the global economy and global food prices.

Interestingly, while in April the PRC's focus on criticising the continuation of the war, and the US, were the most widely shared topics, this was not the case in May and June. In these later two months the topics explicitly criticising the West—i.e., the topics “Criticising the Continuation of the War,” “The US,” “NATO Expansionism,” and “UN Multilateral Security Action”—were not among the top three most shared topics, noted in bold, despite receiving greater attention by PRC state-backed media.¹¹¹

For the topics on “Criticising the Continuation of the War”, the most representative posts in each month are as follows. For April:

Whole world suffering but US seeks to drag on conflict The whole world is suffering the broader economic consequences of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict but the United States seeks to make the war drag on for its own gains regardless of the wider repercussions, a Singaporean columnist has said. Current affairs commentator Ang Teck

109. *See supra* Table 4.

110. *See id.*

111. *See id.*

Sin noted the widespread effects of the current crisis and the rising costs that have been felt around the globe.¹¹²

For May:

Unilateral sanctions imposed by Western nations led by the United States carry the sinister intention of promoting regime change in other countries, said a Zimbabwean expert. Since the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the U.S.-led West has wielded sanctions against Russia, with the negative effects of these measures spilling over to impact the wider global economy. Calvern Chitsunge, co-founder and chairperson of a Zimbabwean anti-sanctions lobby group Broad Alliance Against Sanctions (BAAS), said that this is not the first time Western countries have abused unilateral sanctions, and Zimbabwe is also a victim of their sanctions. #GlobalView.¹¹³

And, for June:

It's been 100 days since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. As the U.S.-led West continues to fuel the crisis, observers say that prospects for peace remain elusive. #GLOBALink¹¹⁴

The second emerging theme in this period is a focus on the global economy and food prices. As the global food price topic appearing within the top ten topics in all three months, and global economy appearing in the top ten topics in two months.¹¹⁵ Over the three-month period, food prices become the more dominant

112. CCTV, *Whole World Suffering but US Seeks to Drag on Conflict*, FACEBOOK (Apr. 24, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/cctvcom/videos/1385433668573523/> [https://perma.cc/6VLY-D63T].

113. CCTV, *US Aims to Promote Regime Change by Promoting Unilateral Sanctions on Zimbabwe*, FACEBOOK (May 27, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/cctvcom/videos/705894190485577/> [https://perma.cc/9TRE-CJR2].

114. China Xinhua News, *100 Days on, Peace Remains Elusive as U.S.-Led West Fuels Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, FACEBOOK (June 3, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/XinhuaNewsAgency/videos/516040474044403> [https://perma.cc/GGL6-92ND].

115. *See supra* Table 4.

of the two topics, as represented by the topic rankings.¹¹⁶ Thus, I set out below the most representative posts from this topic over this time period. What is evident from these posts is the PRC's desire to associate global food problems with the war in Ukraine. This is not, of course, unique to the PRC, and was also a feature in many non-PRC news outlets. The representative "Global Food Prices" topic for April states:

India is faces a new round of heatwaves after passing the hottest March on record. As scorching temperatures force early closures of schools and send people indoors, India is also facing its worst electricity shortage in more than six years. Power cuts are expected to worsen in the coming days with soaring power demand, Reuters reports. In the capital, New Delhi, temperatures have soared past 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit) for several days. The extreme heat threatens the health of millions, disrupts industrial production, and may affect the harvest of wheat at a time when the situation between Russia and Ukraine has sparked a global food crisis. #India #heatwave #NewDelhi #electricityshortage #powercut #climate #cgtnamerica.¹¹⁷

For May:

In #Afghanistan, 1.1 million children under the age of 5 will likely face the most severe form of #malnutrition this year, according to the UN, as increasing numbers of hungry, wasting-away children are brought into hospital wards. #UN and other aid agencies were able to stave off outright #famine after the #Taliban takeover of Afghanistan last year, rolling out a massive emergency aid program that fed millions. But they are struggling to keep pace with relentlessly worsening conditions. #Poverty is spiraling and making more Afghans in need of aid, global food prices are mounting from the war in Ukraine, and promises of international funding so far are not coming

116. *Id.*

117. CGTN, *India Is Faces a New Round Of Heatwaves After Passing the Hottest March on Record*, FACEBOOK (Apr. 29, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaGlobalTVNetwork/posts/pfbid034Z86esZi8kVGJuiZ7KbRMZ2qGJvsN5vqRPBAMPY3spVbN5sC94tu6tGwD9YnEsK2l> [<https://perma.cc/3ACX-KUWS>].

through, according to an assessment report issued this month. #CGTNAmerica.¹¹⁸

And for June:

World Trade Organization (WTO) Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala warned of food crisis due to the #Russia-#Ukraine conflict at the organization's 12th Ministerial Conference on June 12. She said that droughts, floods, heatwaves and other extreme weather events combined with COVID-19 pandemic-related supply chain bottlenecks have led to rising food prices around the world, and the WTO must respond to a looming food crisis.¹¹⁹

To summarise, in this later time period we see a very distinct break both in PRC state-backed media post content and volume from the preceding two months.¹²⁰ In the immediate build up to and initial period of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, PRC state-backed media focused on a more descriptive and diplomatic approach, which appears to be seeking to project the PRC as a responsible commentator and actor on the international stage. This period was also marked by a very sharp increase in the volume of posts by PRC state-backed media on Facebook.¹²¹ In the period from April to June, we observe a shift in narrative focus towards more criticism of perceived Western involvement in the Ukraine war, and the wider impact particularly on the global economy and food prices.¹²² However, at the same time, the number of Facebook posts mentioning Ukraine declines markedly. Importantly, while the criticism of the West receives the most

118. CGTN America, *Children in Afghanistan Could Face Severe Malnutrition*, FACEBOOK (May 26, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/cgtnamerica/photos/a.451232011638743/5098209930274238/?type=3> [<https://perma.cc/W35D-PV2F>].

119. CGTN, *WTO Chief Warns of Food Crisis Due to Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, FACEBOOK (June 14, 2022), <https://www.facebook.com/ChinaGlobalTVNetwork/videos/424528945973356/> [<https://perma.cc/LNH6-P3R6>].

120. *See supra* Figure 1 and Tables 3-4.

121. *See id.*

122. *See supra* Table 4.

shares in April, for May and June this topic falls to fifth or sixth in terms of rankings.¹²³

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The PRC's policy approach to Ukraine is ambiguous, as there is a contradiction between its support for Russia and the assertion that Ukraine has territorial sovereignty. It is not straightforward for the PRC to resolve this contradiction between supporting Russia and defending the principle of territorial sovereignty. This article uncovers and assesses how the PRC has managed the task of reconciliation of these objectives in the case of its discourse toward international audiences on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I find the PRC uses international social media as a tool to project its stance on Ukraine, and attempt to influence international audiences, and that there are two distinct phases of this discourse in the early months of the war.

Initially in January through March, the PRC appeared to be attempting to avoid presenting itself as a strident advocate of a solution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict by producing a large volume of posts discussing factual reporting of events on the ground and diplomatic statements calling for peace.¹²⁴ This approach appeared to reflect an attempt by the PRC to advance its policy goal of acting as a responsible, and in this case peace-promoting, actor in the broader international community. It is important to note that this diplomatic narrative appears to be seeking to enhance the PRC's standing among international audiences, as it conveys a tone and message of peace and harmony. The high volume of these messages is evidence of the PRC's strong motivation to position itself as a responsible international leader.¹²⁵

In pursuing this narrative, the PRC also avoided confronting the apparent contradiction between the goals of supporting Russia and defending territorial sovereignty. It is, however, notable that Facebook users were less interested in sharing posts about the PRC's diplomatic stance, despite the heavy volume

123. *Id.*

124. *See supra* Tables 2-3.

125. *See generally* DENG, *supra* note 30, at 1; BRADY, *supra* note 25, at 1.

with which these narratives were posted.¹²⁶ Rather, users tended to share posts on the UN peace talks and the effects of the war itself on Ukrainian cities.¹²⁷

As the war progressed into the spring of 2022, however, PRC state-backed media changed their narrative to one that used the Ukraine conflict as a tool to oppose Western expansionism.¹²⁸ This approach simultaneously addresses two of the PRC's other policy goals. The first of these is appeasing a domestic nationalist audience, consistent with PRC rhetoric having moved under Xi Jinping toward a more overtly nationalist stance, which has included more strident criticism of the West, and particularly the role of the US.¹²⁹ The second is advancing its international aim of signaling to countries the dangers of propagating NATO-like structures by the US.¹³⁰ It also reconciles the contradiction between the PRC's support for Russia and defense of territorial sovereignty. In suggesting that Western expansionism has provoked Russia into instigating the war, and is responsible for the continuation of the war, the PRC can both implicitly support Russia and blame the West for the loss of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty. In this sense, by shifting to an anti-Western narrative, the PRC has, at least temporarily, bridged the contradiction.

In the second phase, the PRC's official commentary thus moved towards a more overt criticism of the West, and particularly the US, consistent with a more nationalist approach. I surmise that the PRC sought to reconcile the obvious tension across the objectives by dramatically lowering the volume of its communication internationally, and thus adopting a critical but lower profile stance. While this more nationalist rhetoric appears to have resolved the contradiction in the PRC's stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the more nationalist tone is designed to appeal more to a domestic rather than international audience. Unlike the earlier narrative, this nationalist, anti-West rhetoric does not align with the PRC's stated goals of enhancing soft power and international respect. It may be that in recognition of

126. *See supra* Table 3.

127. *Id.*

128. *See supra* Table 4.

129. *See* Wang, *supra* note 5.

130. Martina, *supra* note 7.

this, the volume of communication fell internationally. In short, while PRC state-backed media rhetoric may echo the PRC's broader policy approach toward a particular issue, in this case the Russia-Ukraine conflict, when targeting an international audience, constructive diplomacy narratives are projected at higher volume than more critical nationalist and anti-West narratives.

