



## Strategic Competition and the Battle of Narratives: A Sociopsychological Perspective

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**Abstract:** Strategic competition and the concept of being in a struggle currently shape the mindsets and the construction of the social reality of policymakers, academics, and the public. This article analyzes how U.S. policymakers and analysts, the Russian leadership, and the Chinese Communist Party perceive the current security situation. It also explores the often-underestimated role of strategic narratives. By summarizing the key points of the strategic narratives of the United States, Russia, and China, the article discusses the implications of the competitive mindset on humanity's ability to address essential global security challenges.

**Keywords:** strategic narratives, competition, cooperation, China, Russia, United States.

### Strategic Competition – the New Reality?

The security policy world has entered a new reality. The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy (US NSS) outlines the current dilemma faced by policymakers and their advisors.<sup>1</sup> On one hand, it states that the world is “in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>1</sup> Although “strategic competition” is a Western (U.S.) concept, other major global actors, such as the Chinese Communist Party and the leadership of the Russian Federation, share the general idea of a world where powers are in a struggle. This article delves deeper into the respective concepts while discussing narratives in strategic competition.

<sup>2</sup> *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, October 2022), 2, accessed June 19, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

challenges like climate change “demand increased global cooperation.”<sup>3</sup> This dilemma arises from the different logic and modes of interaction involved in cooperation and competition.

The Pentagon’s *Joint Concept for Competing* defines strategic competition as “a persistent and long-term struggle that occurs between two or more adversaries seeking to pursue incompatible interests without necessarily engaging in armed conflict with each other.”<sup>4</sup> This definition closely aligns with the sociological understanding of struggle and conflict. In this context, both terms describe not only violent conflict but also social interactions involving conflicting interests, with the primary goal being the realization of each actor’s interests – thus defining the situation in which the interaction takes place as “strategic.”

The *Joint Concept for Competing* also recognizes the existence of “normal and peaceful competition among allies, strategic partners, and other international actors who are not potentially hostile.”<sup>5</sup> And it even opens the possibility for cooperation when interests are compatible or “coincide.”<sup>6</sup> Hence, by adopting a (strategic) competition mindset,<sup>7</sup> actors place the realization of their interests as the overarching objective at the center of their deliberations. For them, strategic competition is “an enduring condition to be managed, not a problem to be solved.”<sup>8</sup> As a consequence of this perception, actors apply a “strategic”<sup>9</sup> logic to interaction, framing social situations as conflict or struggle.<sup>10</sup> However, this logic often impedes or even excludes the possibility of global cooperation, which would require a logic of interaction that prioritizes collective or even global interests over individual ones.

The strategic logic of interaction is not confined to decision-makers or the military. Within the West, the narrative of strategic competition increasingly re-

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<sup>3</sup> *National Security Strategy*, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> “Joint Concept for Competing,” Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 10, 2023, 1, accessed June 22, 2024, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23698400/20230213-joint-concept-for-competing-signed.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> “Joint Concept for Competing.”

<sup>6</sup> “Joint Concept for Competing,” iii.

<sup>7</sup> “Joint Concept for Competing,” iv.

<sup>8</sup> “Joint Concept for Competing,” 7.

<sup>9</sup> In this article, we use the term “strategic” in the tradition of Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action (“Theorie kommunikativen Handelns”). According to Habermas, “strategic action” is a mode of interaction in which an actor aims to realizing their own interests (“teleological action”) rather than seeking a common understanding of the situation (i.e., cooperation). Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Band 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), 390 and 396.

<sup>10</sup> In this article, the terms “conflict” and “struggle” are used in a sociological sense. This means they do not exclusively refer to violent conflict but rather to social interactions involving conflicting interests, where the primary goal of the actors is to pursue their respective interests.

places those about the benefits of cooperation and globalization.<sup>11</sup> European scholar Mark Leonard even refers to this shift as a “connectivity conundrum.”<sup>12</sup> He argues that the high degree of connectivity achieved through the ongoing process of globalization cannot be used for either “good or ill” but instead exacerbates conflict.<sup>13</sup> Summarizing the current situation, Leonard concludes that connectivity “gives people the opportunity for conflict; the reasons to fight each other; and a lot of weapons with which to inflict harm.”<sup>14</sup>

A number of developments and incidents drives this change in perception. Important examples include Russia’s attempts to control the post-Soviet space by weaponizing existing interdependencies<sup>15</sup> (e.g., against Moldova or Georgia), culminating in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022, China’s shift in policy and increasingly assertive behavior after Xi took office as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012 and the disruption of supply chains, as well as nationalist and self-centered mitigation strategies of countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown above, the United States adopts a relatively binary approach, distinguishing between allies, partners, and adversaries, with whom limited cooperation in certain areas could be possible if national interests coincide.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict* (London: Penguin Random House, 2022), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace*, 1-18.

<sup>13</sup> Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace*, 9f. An alternative perspective and a possible solution of the dilemma can be found in Zhao Tingyang, *Alles unter dem Himmel. Vergangenheit und Zukunft der Weltordnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2020), 17-21.

<sup>14</sup> See Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the work of Tatyana Novosiolova and Goran Georgiev, “Countering Hybrid Warfare in the Black Sea Region: Strengthening Institutional Frameworks for Protection and Resilience” (Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023), accessed August 29, 2024, <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/countering-hybrid-warfare-in-the-black-sea-region/>; “Energy (In)Security and Good Governance in Moldova: Making the Energy Transition Possible,” *Policy Brief* No. 143, Center for the Study of Democracy, January 19, 2024, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/energy-insecurity-and-good-governance-in-moldova-making-the-energy-transition-possible/>.

<sup>16</sup> See “Joint Concept for Competing,” 1; *National Security Strategy*, 2; Patrick Quirk and Caitlin Dearing Scott, “Maximizing US Foreign Aid for Strategic Competition,” Report, Atlantic Council, June 29, 2023, accessed August 29, 2024, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/maximizing-us-foreign-aid-for-strategic-competition/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/maximizing-us-foreign-aid-for-strategic-competition/); “FMS 2023: Retooling Foreign Military Sales for An Age of Strategic Competition,” Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of State, May 18, 2023, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/fms-2023-retooling-foreign-military-sales-for-an-age-of-strategic-competition/>; Jessica Lewis, “The Future of Security Assistance in an Era of Strategic Competition,” U.S. Department of State, December 5, 2023, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/the-future-of-security-assistance-in-an-era-of-strategic-competition/>.

The European Union, as another important Western player, is adopting a more nuanced approach to addressing the challenges arising from the developments described above. While acknowledging the competitive dimension in international relations, EU member states, for example, have categorized Russia as a “long-term and direct threat to European security”<sup>17</sup> and China as “a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival.”<sup>18</sup> Especially the perception of China as a systemic rival is a new development, reflecting a reaction to the resurgence of socialist ideology within the Chinese Communist Party after Xi became General Secretary in 2012 (“Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”).<sup>19</sup> EU member states now view themselves as being engaged in a “fierce”<sup>20</sup> or “real battle of narratives”<sup>21</sup> in a global “competition of governance systems.”<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, the Chinese Communist Party under Xi, while again strictly applying historical and dialectic materialism as the foundation of socialist theory, interprets global developments in a way almost similar to the EU’s perspective. By constructing social reality as a systemic struggle between communism with Chinese characteristics and Western political ideas,<sup>23</sup> it still manages to permit cooperation with its systemic rivals. This flexibility arises because socialism accommodates ambiguity, conceptualizing social reality as a set of contradictions

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<sup>17</sup> “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” European External Action Service, March 24, 2022, accessed June 23 2024, 18, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en).

<sup>18</sup> “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence.” An interesting perspective on the EU’s early attempts to forge a strategic narrative on EU-China relations can be found in Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, “The EU’s Struggle for a Strategic Narrative on China,” in *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, ed. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Jinghan Zeng (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, December 2021), 19-43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53153-9>.

<sup>19</sup> The role of socialism in the Chinese Communist Party has long been underestimated by Western scholars and observers. This has changed since Xi Jinping placed “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” at the center of Chinese policy. For example, see Daniel Tobin, “How Xi Jinping’s ‘New Era’ Should Have Ended U.S. Debate of Beijing’s Ambitions,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, May 8, 2020, accessed June 23, 2024, [www.csis.org/analysis/how-xi-jinpings-new-era-should-have-ended-us-debate-beijings-ambitions](http://www.csis.org/analysis/how-xi-jinpings-new-era-should-have-ended-us-debate-beijings-ambitions).

<sup>20</sup> “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” 4.

<sup>21</sup> “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” 14.

<sup>22</sup> “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence.”

<sup>23</sup> See for example Shiu Sin Por, “Tianxia: China’s Concept of International Order,” *Global Asia*, accessed August 29, 2024, [https://www.globalasia.org/v15no2/cover/tianxia-chinas-concept-of-international-order\\_shiu-sin-por](https://www.globalasia.org/v15no2/cover/tianxia-chinas-concept-of-international-order_shiu-sin-por) or Tingyang Zhao, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven’ (Tian-xia, 天下),” *Social Identities* 12, no. 1 (January 2006): 29-41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630600555559>.

that do not require immediate resolution. Additionally, Chinese culture (i.e., the “Chinese Characteristics”) is highly tolerant of ambiguity.<sup>24</sup>

In this regard, the mindset of the Russian leadership differs from the Chinese perspective. Although both perceive themselves as being in a struggle with the political West, particularly the “Anglo-Saxons,”<sup>25</sup> the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese thinkers view their system as being superior to liberalism and Western democracy.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, they actively promote an alternative that they believe is more suitable for solving global problems.<sup>27</sup> The Chinese Communist Party perceives itself as being in the role of the active challenger in this context.

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<sup>24</sup> Delving deeper into Chinese cultural aspects, such as philosophical Daoism or the complexities of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” would exceed the scope of this article. Interested readers may find a useful overview in Tobin’s article, “How Xi Jinping’s ‘New Era’ Should Have Ended U.S. Debate of Beijing’s Ambitions.” It is also advisable to consult original Chinese reports, which are available in English. See, for example, the “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” <https://english.www.gov.cn/2022special/20thcpccongress/>. A summary of the results of the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party can be found in “Key Takeaways from Xi’s Report to the Party Congress,” *Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS)*, October 20, 2022, accessed June 23, 2024, <https://merics.org/en/merics-briefs/key-takeaways-xis-report-party-congress>. For a general overview of Daoism, see <https://iep.utm.edu/daoismdaoist-philosophy/> (accessed June 23, 2024).

<sup>25</sup> For the use of the term “Anglo-Saxons,” see for example Stefano Caprio, “Showdown with the ‘Anglosaksy,’” *AsiaNews*, May 21, 2022, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.asia-news.it/news-en/Showdown-with-the-Anglosaksy-55856.html>.

<sup>26</sup> In this context, influential Chinese thinkers like Tingyang Zhao propose a revised version of the historic Chinese idea of *tian xia* (天下, “all under heaven”) and explain its superiority. See Zhao, *Alles unter dem Himmel. Vergangenheit und Zukunft der Weltordnung*, 13-36, or Zhao, “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven,’” 29-41. Many Western recipients of the “All-Under-Heaven” idea unfortunately do not take the time to delve into Chinese philosophy and, as a result, are either unable or unwilling to grasp the complexity and benefits of the concept. Consequently, in the Western discourse, “All-Under-Heaven” is often reduced to a limited understanding of a tribute-system with China at the center. For example, see Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “China’s Cosmological Communism: A Challenge to Liberal Democracies – Imperial Philosophy Meets Marxist Orthodoxy in Beijing’s Global Ambitions,” *MERICS*, July 18, 2018, accessed June 23, 2024, <https://merics.org/en/report/chinas-cosmological-communism-challenge-liberal-democracies>.

<sup>27</sup> In his report to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party Xi points out that “the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind.” “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report at 19th CPC National Congress,” *China Daily*, November 4, 2017, accessed June 23, 2024, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content\\_34115212.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm).

On the contrary, the Russian leadership sees itself on the defensive, engaged in an existential fight and as a victim of a Western attack.<sup>28</sup> One essential element of the perceived threat to Russian or “Eurasian” civilization and identity is Western cultural influence. Russian thinkers like Andrey Ilnitsky blame the West for forging a “global war for hegemony”<sup>29</sup> and a “mental war”<sup>30</sup> against Russia and the rest of the world. Ilnitsky accuses the West of destroying the identity of non-Western individuals, societies, and countries by undermining their faith, culture, and moral and religious foundations, eroding their political systems, and discrediting their intellectual foundations, including science, interpretation of history, ideology, and the education system. Thus, according to Ilnitsky, these efforts would undermine societal trust and social stability, ultimately provoking the collapse of the targeted society and state, which would then be replaced by a Western-style system. In his construction of a large-scale Western influence operation, Ilnitsky highlights both the individual and societal levels, as well as the interaction between the two.<sup>31</sup>

Although the idea of a Western “mental war” on Russia and other countries may seem far-fetched, it nonetheless highlights the importance of the sociopsychological dimension in strategic competition, as will be illustrated in the following paragraphs. To fully grasp the impact of the current shift in how global processes are perceived, it is essential to understand the mental and sociopsychological processes that construct social reality and guide the human mind and behavior of actors.

## Constructing Social Reality

### *Mental Processes and the Role of Concepts*

Like in other disciplines, psychology and neuroscience feature several, often contradicting, theories about mental processes. Scientists such as Lisa Feldman Bar-

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<sup>28</sup> See the speech of the Russian President Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference: “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” *President of Russia Official Website*, February 10, 2007, accessed June 23, 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>; or his interview with Tucker Carlson 2024: “Interview to Tucker Carlson,” *President of Russia Official Website*, February 9, 2024, accessed June 23, 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/73411>.

<sup>29</sup> Andrey Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology,” <https://www.vision-gt.eu/news/the-antichrist-as-a-technology/>, February 6, 2024, accessed June 23, 2024. Also available in Russian: <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/antikhris-kak-tekhnologiya.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

<sup>31</sup> Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

rett<sup>32</sup> and Luiz Pessoa<sup>33</sup> advocate for a systemic approach to explain brain activity, rather than the functionalist or mechanistic linear models that conceptualize the brain as an information-processing machine. Scientific evidence supports the idea of the brain functioning as a “prediction device”<sup>34</sup> or “prediction machine.”<sup>35</sup> In this context, affects and “interoception,”<sup>36</sup> which form the basis for the construction of emotions, play an essential role.<sup>37</sup> By generating predictions, the brain can decouple sensory inputs from behavioral outputs, enabling organisms to adapt to changing situations.<sup>38</sup> The brain’s anatomy suggests that sensory inputs from the outside world play a secondary role, while the majority of neurons are involved in prediction processes.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the brain actively constructs reality rather than merely reacting to sensory inputs.<sup>40</sup> These constructs rely on mental conceptualizations of the world, such as concepts of structures, processes, emotions, and more.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, organisms like humans do not perceive an objective reality but what the brain, based on concepts, predicts to be real – a “controlled hallucination.”<sup>42</sup> The brain’s concept-based model of the world is actively refined through feedback or prediction loops triggered by sensory input, known as “prediction errors.”<sup>43</sup> The unique ability of humans to share their concepts and understanding of (social) situations through language (i.e., narratives) transforms these constructed realities into shared social realities. According to Feldman Barrett, the use of shared and synchronized concepts is a prerequisite for successful communication.<sup>44</sup> These shared and synchronized concepts are conveyed through narratives (see Figure 1).

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<sup>32</sup> See Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (London, UK: Pan Books, 2018), 22-24, for different theories on “emotions.” Also, see Anil Seth, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 2021), 11-31, for discussion on functionalist, physicalist (i.e., materialist), idealist, dualist, and phenomenological approaches.

<sup>33</sup> Luiz Pessoa, *The Entangled Brain: How Perception, Cognition, and Emotion Are Woven Together* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2022), 7-13, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14636.001.0001>.

<sup>34</sup> Pessoa, *The Entangled Brain*, 125; Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 86.

<sup>35</sup> Seth, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*, 76 and 112f.

<sup>36</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 56f.

<sup>37</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 72ff.

<sup>38</sup> Pessoa, *The Entangled Brain*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 61, Figure 4-1.

<sup>40</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 59f and Pessoa, *The Entangled Brain*, 126.

<sup>41</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 85-94.

<sup>42</sup> Seth, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*, 76ff, 273.

<sup>43</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 62.

<sup>44</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 94.

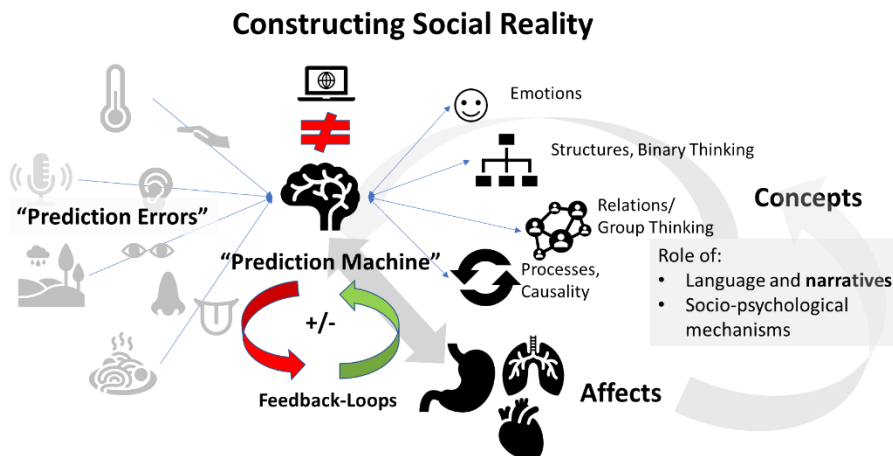


Figure 1: Constructing Social Reality.

### *The Role of Narratives*

“Narrative” in this context is a neutral term.<sup>45</sup> Narratives fulfill an essential communicative function.<sup>46</sup> They are much more than just stories because they create social reality for humans, forming the foundation of their identity, beliefs, and behavior. Narratives integrate and sequence events and incidents, establishing a causal relationship between them. A narrative includes structural elements such as characters<sup>47</sup> or actors, scenes and settings, obstacles and challenges to overcome, tools or methods to achieve goals, and desired or feared end-states. Humans are surrounded by narratives throughout their lives. Parents share nar-

<sup>45</sup> It is important to conceptualize narratives as something neutral, because in political debates, narratives are sometimes associated with disinformation and manipulation attempts (for example, see Joshua Kroeker, “A War of Narratives: Russia’s Disinformation Abuses History,” *New Eastern Europe*, January 23, 2023, accessed June 19, 2024, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/01/23/a-war-of-narratives-russias-disinformation-abuses-history/>). Framing narratives in this way reduces them to a strategic means, which is a very limited perspective that unnecessarily confines the explanatory power of the concept. An overview of the use of narratives as a political tool can be found in Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 369ff, and Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 84ff and 128ff.

<sup>47</sup> These “characters” are sometimes very generalized. In conspiracy theories, there might be the “enlightened” and the “evil elites,” the “globalists,” etc. In other narratives, there are the “good” and “the evil.” These generalized characters are often used to create in-groups and out-groups. One illustrative example of this is Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”



ratives with their children to explain the world, while peers use and create narratives during adolescence to make sense of their experiences. Narratives evoke emotions,<sup>48</sup> construct social reality,<sup>49</sup> and build shared group identities. Narratives combine and integrate pieces of information, explain certain events, and arrange them in a logical order. During this process, narrative creators define the identities of certain actors and offer explanations for their motivations.

Narratives operate on different levels. On the individual level, they construct personal identity, create a meaningful biography (i.e., help individuals make sense of their lives), and justify past and future actions. On the group level, narratives construct social reality, generate group identities, foster “collective intentionality,”<sup>50</sup> and establish intersubjectivity, all of which support human interaction and communication.<sup>51</sup> In addition to their general communicative and social functions, narratives can also be used as strategic<sup>52</sup> instruments to influence and shape the social reality of a target audience, thereby affecting its behavior.

## Narratives as an Instrument in Strategic Competition

### *Strategic Narratives*

A political or strategic narrative is “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.”<sup>53</sup> These narratives are tailored to specific audiences. They utilize, adapt, and manipulate<sup>54</sup> existing narratives, thereby

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<sup>48</sup> In academic discourse, the definition of “emotion,” whether they are “real,” and how they are linked to and connected with perception and cognition are subjects of ongoing debate (see, for example, Lisa Feldman Barrett, “Emotions are Real,” *Emotion* 12, no. 3 (2012): 413-429, <https://www.affective-science.org/pubs/2012/emotions-are-real.pdf>). We will revisit the function of emotions in the cognitive dimension and in narratives later in this article.

<sup>49</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 128ff.

<sup>50</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made*, 135.

<sup>51</sup> Also see Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Jinghan Zeng, “Introduction,” in *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, 6. For a general overview, see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit: Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1980).

<sup>52</sup> For the use of the term “strategic,” see footnote 9.

<sup>53</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, 2.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Teun A. van Dijk, “Discourse and Manipulation,” *Discourse & Society* 17, no 3 (2006): 359-388, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506060250>. For the increasingly relevant topic of manipulation through gaming, see, for example Willy Christian Kritz, Toshiko Kikkawa, and Junkichi Sugiura, “Manipulation Through Gamification and Gaming,” in *Gaming as a Cultural Commons*, ed. Toshiko Kikkawa, Willy Christian Kriz, and Junkichi Sugiura (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022), 185-199, or Benjamin Möbus, “‘Würden wir die Rolle von Computerspielen nicht für wichtig erachten, würden wir nicht tun, was wir tun’ – Die Identitäre Bewegung und das propa-

shaping the social reality of the target audience according to the strategic objectives of the narrator. Such attempts are more convincing when supported by coherent actions, concrete examples, or credible evidence.<sup>55</sup> When actors use narratives strategically, they aim to convince or persuade others that their understanding and perception of the world are correct while those of others are wrong. By employing strategic narratives, actors can influence and shape the concepts that form the foundation of social reality, the interpretation of situations and events, and the behavior of others. This makes strategic narratives powerful tools in strategic competition. The ultimate goal of narrative crafters is to achieve interpretative dominance over the social reality in their target audiences. Viable options for achieving this dominance include controlling the narrative by restricting the target audiences' information space,<sup>56</sup> crafting a more appealing and convincing narrative than that of an opponent,<sup>57</sup> or undermining an opponent's narrative through information manipulation and interference.<sup>58</sup>

Competing strategic narratives often draw on the same observations but charge them with different meanings. An illustrative example is the completely

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gandistische Potential von Computerspielen am Beispiel von Heimat Defender: Rebellion," *ZepRA* 2, no. 1 (2023): 4-49, <https://www.zepa-journal.de/index.php/zepra/issue/view/5/2>.

<sup>55</sup> This idea represents a comprehensive approach to strategic communication, emphasizing that all interaction is a form of communication.

<sup>56</sup> A widely used method to restrict the information space is the so-called "foreign agent" legislation. Examples include the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act (see "What is FARA?" *FARA.us*, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.fara.us/>), the Russian Foreign Agent Law (see Human Rights Watch, "Russia: New Restrictions for 'Foreign Agents': Foreign Influence Would Now Suffice for Toxic Designation," December 1, 2022, accessed June 24, 2024, [www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/01/russia-new-restrictions-foreign-agents](http://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/01/russia-new-restrictions-foreign-agents)), as well as similar legislation in China (see Tom Phillips, "China Passes Law Imposing Security Controls on Foreign NGOs," *The Guardian*, April 28, 2016, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/28/china-passes-law-imposing-security-controls-on-foreign-ngos>) and Georgia (see Rayhan Demytrie and Emily Atkinson, "Georgia Approves Controversial 'Foreign Agent' Law, Sparking More Protests," *BBC*, May 14, 2024, accessed June 24, 2024, [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-69007465](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-69007465)). The EU is currently debating foreign agent registration legislation to limit foreign information manipulation and interference activities (see Mared Gwyn Jones, "Planned EU Foreign Influence Law Will Not Criminalise or Discriminate, Brussels Says," *EuroNews*, December 12, 2023, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/12/planned-eu-foreign-influence-law-will-not-criminalise-or-discriminate-brussels-says>).

<sup>57</sup> The "American Dream" is an example of a successful narrative. See "What Is the American Dream? Examples and How to Measure It," *Investopedia*, July 2, 2024, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/a/american-dream.asp>.

<sup>58</sup> One technique for undermining domestic narratives is "foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)." European Union External Action Service, "1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Towards a Framework for Networked Defence," February 7, 2023, accessed June 26, 2024, [www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/1st-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats\\_en](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/1st-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en).

different interpretation of reality in Europe after the end of the Cold War by NATO member states and the Russian leadership. While the political West interprets the accession of former Warsaw Pact states to NATO (referred to as NATO “enlargement”) as a process aimed “at promoting stability and cooperation, at building a Europe whole and free, united in peace, democracy and common values,”<sup>59</sup> the Russian leadership views the same development as an aggressive act and a threat to its existence,<sup>60</sup> labeling it NATO “expansion.” In this context, the Russian president pointed out in his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference: “I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust.”<sup>61</sup>

While the interpretations of reality and the respective narratives may differ significantly, both can evoke strong emotions in their target audiences by leveraging the basic sociopsychological mechanism of in-group and out-group thinking. The Western concept of “NATO enlargement” and the resulting perception of reality builds on a positive vision, evoking positive emotions such as happiness and anticipation, generating a sense of hope,<sup>62</sup> and creating a strong in-group with common values. In contrast, the reality conveyed by the Russian perception of “NATO expansion” centers on the strong emotion of fear, constructing an in-group that feels threatened by an aggressive out-group.

The fear- and threat-centric Russian narrative also resonates with specific anti-U.S. (or anti-“Anglo-Saxon”<sup>63</sup>) audiences in the West,<sup>64</sup> who feel alienated

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<sup>59</sup> “Enlargement and Article 10,” NATO, March 8, 2024, accessed April 25, 2024, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49212.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49212.htm).

<sup>60</sup> See the speech by Russian President Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy.” Also, see Ted Galen Carpenter, “Many Predicted NATO Expansion Would Lead to War. Those Warnings Were Ignored,” *The Guardian*, February 28, 2022, accessed June 25, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/28/nato-expansion-war-russia-ukraine>.

<sup>61</sup> See the speech by Russian President Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference.

<sup>62</sup> For the construction of the concept of “hope,” see Warren TenHouten, “The Emotions of Hope: From Optimism to Sanguinity, from Pessimism to Despair,” *The American Sociologist* 54 (2023): 76-100, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-022-09544-1>. Whether hope is an emotion is debatable. TenHouten himself categorizes hope as an assessment rather than an emotion.

<sup>63</sup> Caprio, “Showdown with the ‘Anglosaksy’.”

<sup>64</sup> These groups include both far-right and left-wing parties and factions in Europe. While the anti-liberal, anti-U.S. narratives were not created by Russia and have been shared by these groups for decades, Russia supports these audiences to foster polarization in Europe. In this context, the exposure of the Russian-controlled platform “Voice of Europe” provides valuable insights into Russian influence operations in the West. See Nicholas Vinocur, Pieter Haeck, and Eddy Wax, “Russian Influence Scandal Rocks EU,” *Politico*, March 29, 2024, accessed April 29, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/voice-of-europe-russia-influence-scandal-election/>.

by a liberal Western lifestyle. It is difficult to determine whether the positive, hope-centered, or negative, fear-based approach to crafting narratives and constructing reality is more effective. However, NATO and, to some extent, the European Union are increasingly adopting a more fear-based construction of reality, reflecting the perception of Russia as a significant threat.<sup>65</sup>

### ***The Battle of Narratives***

As mentioned above, major global players perceive themselves as being engaged in a struggle. The battle of narratives is in full swing, with actors such as the United States, Russia, and China actively crafting their strategic narratives. They aim to persuade specific target audiences of their respective perspectives and, in doing so, win dominance in the competition for interpretation across different parts of the world. Each of these actors expects to garner active support for their position.

### ***US Narrative***

U.S. authors and officials have tried to influence perceptions of China's rise by highlighting the potential danger of a high-intensity military conflict between the United States and China through the narrative of the "Thucydides's Trap"<sup>66</sup> or

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<sup>65</sup> NATO, "Relations with Russia," last updated August 5, 2024, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50090.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50090.htm). It seems to be a common basic assumption in security policy debates that a shared perception of a threat is a prerequisite for the willingness to engage in collective action. One example of this is the article by Jan Joel Andersson, "Defence: Solidarity, Trust and Threat Perception," *EUISS Alert* 33, July 2015, accessed April 30, 2024, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISS\\_Files/Alert\\_33\\_Transatlantic\\_defence.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISS_Files/Alert_33_Transatlantic_defence.pdf).

<sup>66</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). For the discussion on a potential military conflict between the United States and China see: "The Tiger Project: War and Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific," Atlantic Council, accessed August 29, 2024, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/the-tiger-project-war-and-deterrence-in-the-indo-pacific/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/the-tiger-project-war-and-deterrence-in-the-indo-pacific/); Aaron L. Friedberg, "What's at Stake in the Indo-Pacific: What Happens at Sea Will Determine What Happens on Land Across the Region," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 147, no. 10 (October 2021): 1, 424, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/october/whats-stake-indo-pacific>; Joseph Clark, "U.S. Focuses on Deterrence as China Raises Stakes in Indo-Pacific," *U.S. Department of Defense*, October 24, 2024, [www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3566970/us-focuses-on-deterrence-as-china-raises-stakes-in-indo-pacific/](http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3566970/us-focuses-on-deterrence-as-china-raises-stakes-in-indo-pacific/); Courtney Kube and Mosheh Gains, "Air Force General Predicts War with China in 2025, Tells Officers to Prep by Firing 'a Clip' at a Target, and 'Aim for the Head'," *NBC News*, January 28, 2023, [www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-air-force-general-predicts-war-china-2025-memo-rcna67967](http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-air-force-general-predicts-war-china-2025-memo-rcna67967); Unshin Lee Harpley, "INDOPACOM Boss on China: 'Haven't Faced a Threat Like This Since World War II'," *Air & Space Force Magazine*, March 21, 2024, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/indopacom-boss-china-threat-world-war-ii/>; full statement of Admiral Aquilino can be accessed at [www.armed-services.senate.gov/download/aquilino-statement-032124](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/download/aquilino-statement-032124).

the threat of Chinese “dept-trap diplomacy.”<sup>67</sup> While the target audience for “Thucydides’s Trap” is somewhat broad, the “dept-trap diplomacy” narrative is specifically designed to evoke fear in the Global South and to undermine the Chinese narrative of “blazing a new [and independent] trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization.”<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, the United States, together with other liberal democracies, continues to uphold a positive vision of a democratic world, which retains strong appeal in the Global South.<sup>69</sup>

### **The Russian Narrative**

As shown earlier, the Russian narrative is fear-based and portrays Russia as a victim.<sup>70</sup> Authors like Andrey Ilnitsky conceptualize Russia as a spiritual state-civilization,<sup>71</sup> which stands in stark contrast to the United States and its allies. He depicts the competition between Russia and the United States as a battle between good and evil. David Lewis describes the ideas underpinning the Russian

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<sup>67</sup> For example, see Michal Himmer and Zdeněk Rod, “Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy: Reality or Myth?” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 18, no. 3 (2022): 250-272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2023.2195280>, 252f; Mark Green, “China’s Debt Diplomacy: How Belt and Road Threatens Countries’ Ability to Achieve Self-reliance,” *Foreign Policy*, April 25, 2019, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/25/chinas-debt-diplomacy/>; “Biden Jabs at China ‘Dept-trap Diplomacy’ at Americas Summit,” *The Japanese Times*, November 4, 2024, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/business/2023/11/04/economy/joe-biden-south-central-america-china-debt-trap/>; “Remarks by President Biden Before the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity Leaders’ Summit,” *The White House*, November 3, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/11/03/remarks-by-president-biden-before-the-americas-partnership-for-economic-prosperity-leaders-summit/>; “Remarks by Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen on the U.S.-China Economic Relationship,” *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in China*, April 21, 2023, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/remarks-by-secretary-of-the-treasury-janet-l-yellen-on-the-u-s-china-economic-relationship/>.

<sup>68</sup> See footnote 27.

<sup>69</sup> Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem E. Selormey, “AD489: Africans Welcome China’s Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations,” *Afrobarometer, Dispatch* No. 489, November 15, 2021, accessed June 24, 2024, [www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad489-africans-welcome-chinas-influence-maintain-democratic-aspirations/](http://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad489-africans-welcome-chinas-influence-maintain-democratic-aspirations/).

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Benjamin R. Young, “Putin Has a Grimly Absolute Vision of the ‘Russian World’: The Ukraine War Is Fueled by a Delusion of Civilizational Necessity,” *Foreign Policy*, March 6, 2022, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/06/russia-putin-civilization/>.

<sup>71</sup> In this context, Ilnitsky uses the term “Russkiy mir” to “denote a cultural, geopolitical and religious concept by unification of the whole Russian-speaking population.” See Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.” For the concept of “Russkiy mir” see also Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, “How the Kremlin Promotes ‘Russkiy Mir,’” *Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, May 21, 2021, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://uacrisis.org/en/how-the-kremlin-promotes-russkiy-mir/>; or Alexander Meinenberger, “The Russkiy Mir Foundation: State Politics Through Cultural Endeavors?” *Religion in Praxis*, April 16, 2024, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://religioninpraxis.com/the-russkiy-mir-foundation-state-politics-through-cultural-endeavors/>.

narrative as a “toxic mix of pseudo-science, [anti-American] conspiracy theories, and apocalyptic geopolitics.”<sup>72</sup> According to Lewis, the three main building blocks of the Russian ideological framework are Russian exceptionalism,<sup>73</sup> radical geopolitics (including the idea of a Eurasian geopolitical space), and traditional values. The sense of Russian exceptionalism has intensified in recent years, as Russia views itself as one of the few actors capable of countering the West, based on its perceived cultural and spiritual superiority. The “defeat of the West” is seen as “Russia’s Peacekeeping Mission.”<sup>74</sup>

While the Russian narrative primarily targets a domestic audience, the ideas it conveys are also shared with anti-Western audiences across the globe. In these communities, it influences policy developments and decision-making, such as breaking ties with Western countries, as seen in Mali, or the wave of recent coups in African states.<sup>75</sup> Examples like the “Voice of Europe”<sup>76</sup> platform demonstrate that Russia actively attempts to influence external discourses, thereby shaping the underlying narratives and perceptions of reality in other countries.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, Russia increasingly exerts control over its internal narrative by aligning history books and education with state ideology.<sup>78</sup> The Russian leadership has intensified these efforts since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including initiatives like the ongoing militarization of children.<sup>79</sup>

### ***The Chinese Narrative***

As mentioned above, Russia has portrayed NATO, and especially the United States, as a security threat for nearly two decades. In this regard, it shares some common ground with the Chinese Communist Party’s perception. The similarities between both views are outlined in the 2022 “Joint Statement of the Russian

<sup>72</sup> David Lewis, “Can Russia Develop a New State Ideology?” *RUSI*, January 17, 2023, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/can-russia-develop-new-state-ideology>. Evidence supporting Lewis’s assessment can be found in the article by Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

<sup>73</sup> Ilnitsky, for example, states: “We must realize the spiritual basis of Russia and the ‘Russkiy mir,’ understand and accept that we are all God-chosen people.” Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

<sup>74</sup> Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

<sup>75</sup> Mariel Ferragamo, “Russia’s Growing Footprint in Africa,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 28, 2023, accessed June 25, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/background-er/russias-growing-footprint-africa>.

<sup>76</sup> Vinocur, Haeck, and Wax, “Russian Influence Scandal Rocks EU.”

<sup>77</sup> European Union External Action Service, “1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats,” 9.

<sup>78</sup> “Russia to Hike Spending on ‘Patriotic Education’ Fourfold – RBC,” *The Moscow Times*, October 9, 2023, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/10/09/russia-to-hike-spending-on-patriotic-education-fourfold-rbc-a82703>.

<sup>79</sup> Alla Hurska, “Generation Z: Russia’s Militarization of Children,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 20, no. 134, August 18, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/generation-z-russias-militarization-of-children/>.

Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.”<sup>80</sup> In paragraph III of the Joint Statement, both parties express their concerns regarding international security challenges, two of which are directly linked to the West. The first concern is the fear of “color revolutions”<sup>81</sup> initiated by external forces. The second is the accusation that the West is endangering the security of others:

The sides believe that certain States, military and political alliances and coalitions seek to obtain, directly or indirectly, unilateral military advantages to the detriment of the security of others, including by employing unfair competition practices, intensify geopolitical rivalry, fuel antagonism and confrontation, and seriously undermine the international security order and global strategic stability. The sides oppose further enlargement of NATO and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches, to respect the sovereignty, security and interests of other countries, the diversity of their civilizational, cultural and historical backgrounds, and to exercise a fair and objective attitude towards the peaceful development of other States.<sup>82</sup>

Besides the similarities between Russia and China, this paragraph also highlights their differences. While Russia views the United States and the West as an existential threat, China perceives them more as obstacles to its own development and its vision for other states' progress – key elements of its internal and external narrative.<sup>83</sup> Unlike the Russian perception, which is based on a mix of various ideas but lacks a clear vision for the future, the narrative crafted by the Chinese Communist Party is very coherent. Good representations of the internal narrative include the Party's “resolutions on history”<sup>84</sup> and the reports of the General Secretary to the National Congress of the Communist Party of China.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> “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 Russia, February 4, 2022, accessed December 12, 2024, [www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770](http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770).

<sup>81</sup> This fear is also reflected in Ilnitsky's accusation that the West is conducting a “mental war,” especially against Russia. Ilnitsky, “The Antichrist as a Technology.”

<sup>82</sup> “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era,” para. III.

<sup>83</sup> “Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress.”

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, the full text of the Chinese Communist Party's new resolution on history: “Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century,” *Nikkei Asia*, November 19, 2021, accessed June 25, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-the-Chinese-Communist-Party-s-new-resolution-on-history>.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, “Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress” or “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on October 25, 2022,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, October 25, 2022, accessed June 25, 2024, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530\\_11347389.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347389.html).

The external narrative is also well represented in these reports. Although the leitmotif of the Chinese Communist Party's commitment "to the noble cause of peace and development for humanity"<sup>86</sup> remains, strategic competition has already begun to influence this narrative:

Confronted with drastic changes in the international landscape, especially external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade, and exert maximum pressure on China, we have put our national interests first, focused on internal political concerns, and maintained firm strategic resolve. We have shown a fighting spirit and a firm determination to never yield to coercive power. Throughout these endeavors, we have safeguarded China's dignity and core interests and kept ourselves well-positioned for pursuing development and ensuring security.<sup>87</sup>

Due to growing tensions, the Party acknowledges the necessity to "be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and ever dangerous storms."<sup>88</sup> However, unlike Russia, China signals a general willingness to cooperate. With its top-down approach to interpreting reality, exemplified by the above-mentioned resolutions and reports, a high degree of social control over the Chinese society, and strict regulation of the information space, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains firm control over its internal narrative. External actors' perceptions of China, its perspective on reality, and initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative are more diverse. A 2023 Pew Research Center survey shows that people in high-income countries generally view Chinese influence negatively, whereas China enjoys a positive appeal in several middle-income countries, such as Mexico, Argentina, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Indonesia.<sup>89</sup> The 2021 *Afrobarometer* survey reveals that Chinese influence is viewed more positively in Africa than U.S. influence (63% for China compared to 60% for the United States).<sup>90</sup> It also indicates that China's vision for future development is appealing in Africa, with 22% viewing China as a good role model and 7% supporting the CCP's idea of following their own country's development path. Nevertheless,

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<sup>86</sup> "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," 1.

<sup>87</sup> "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," 3.

<sup>88</sup> "Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," 21f.

<sup>89</sup> Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, "China's Approach to Foreign Policy Gets Largely Negative Reviews in 24-Country Survey: Still, Views of China – and Its Soft Power – Are More Positive in Middle-income Countries," *Pew Research Center*, July 27, 2023, accessed October 2, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/27/chinas-approach-to-foreign-policy-gets-largely-negative-reviews-in-24-country-survey/>.

<sup>90</sup> Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Selormey, "AD489: Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations," 8.



with 33 % support, the United States remains the most preferred role model in Africa.<sup>91</sup>

In Southeast Asia, the CCP's vision for the future of humankind is generally seen in a positive light.<sup>92</sup> In 2024, if forced to pick sides in strategic competition between China and the United States—the least favorable option for ASEAN countries<sup>93</sup>—a 50.5 % majority of ASEAN countries's population would choose China. This marks a significant increase from the previous year, when only 38.9 % preferred China.<sup>94</sup> This shift is noteworthy, as the rise in support coincides with a slight decrease in trust and confidence in China.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, the United States has experienced an even more substantial decline in trust.<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

The idea of a world defined by struggle and competition has become a new social reality for many. This perception, particularly prevalent in countries like Russia, China, and even the United States, significantly shapes political decision-making and has global consequences.

First, actors who perceive themselves as being in competition try to influence and, to some degree, even manipulate discourses and the underlying narratives in other societies. Therefore, the ongoing competition is not only a struggle between competitors or adversaries; it is also a contest for support and allegiance. Hence, societies worldwide must remain vigilant against the threat of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and work to build resilience against it. Institutions such as the European External Action Service<sup>97</sup> and the U.S. Global Engagement Center provide relevant frameworks to support partner countries in this effort.<sup>98</sup>

Second, as discussed earlier in this article, tackling global challenges like climate change requires global cooperation. A competitive mindset that prioritizes

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<sup>91</sup> Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Selormey, "AD489: Africans Welcome China's Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations," 3.

<sup>92</sup> Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024), 45, [www.iseas.edu.sg/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2024-survey-report/](http://www.iseas.edu.sg/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2024-survey-report/).

<sup>93</sup> 92 % of the population in ASEAN countries oppose taking sides in the U.S.-China competition. Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 47.

<sup>94</sup> Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 48.

<sup>95</sup> Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 56.

<sup>96</sup> Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 64.

<sup>97</sup> European Union External Action Service, "2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: A Framework for Networked Defence," January 23, 2024, 12ff, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2nd-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2nd-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en).

<sup>98</sup> U.S. Department of State, "The Framework to Counter Foreign State Information Manipulation," Fact Sheet, January 18, 2024, accessed June 26, 2024, [www.state.gov/the-framework-to-counter-foreign-state-information-manipulation/](http://www.state.gov/the-framework-to-counter-foreign-state-information-manipulation/).

the realization of individual or national interests above all else poses the biggest obstacle to such cooperation.<sup>99</sup> This mindset also affects interactions with others. In societies and countries that do not share the reality of strategic competition, there is a sense of being instrumentalized rather than treated as equal partners.<sup>100</sup> Focusing too heavily on strategic competition will exacerbate the dilemma of struggling while simultaneously needing to cooperate. Leaders who embrace a competitive mindset must strike a careful balance. As noted above, both the United States and the Chinese Communist Party have incorporated elements of cooperation into their competitive worldview. Unfortunately, the Russian leadership's fear- and threat-based perception of reality leaves little room for concession or compromise. As a result, the current Russian leadership represents the greatest obstacle and threat to collaborative solutions for global challenges.

## Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not represent official views of the PFP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium's editors.

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<sup>99</sup> Refer to the deliberations of neuroscientist Thomas Metzinger on the need to develop a "Bewusstseinskultur" ("consciousness culture") in Thomas Metzinger, *Bewusstseinskultur: Spiritualität, intellektuelle Redlichkeit und die planetare Krise* (Berlin/ München: Berlin Verlag, 2023), 11f. For an overview in English see Sascha Benjamin Fink, "Commentary: The Concept of a Bewusstseinskultur," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, Article 732 (July 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00732>.

<sup>100</sup> Katrin Bastian et al., "Perspectives on Strategic Competition," George C. Marshall Center Policy Brief No. 1, November 2024, 3, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/policy-briefs/perspectives-strategic-competition>.

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