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Answering Authoritarian State Asymmetric Challenges

Tools for Deterring Hybrid Threats and Non-Military Coercion from China and Russia

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Abstract

For US leaders and policy makers attempting to deter or punish asymmetric challenges from China, Russia, and other authoritarian states, information has been an underutilized tool. Beijing and Moscow react more negatively to information tools, especially those that challenge regime controls over information, than they do to military, economic, and diplomatic tools. US policy makers should focus on criticizing censorship, advocating for freedom of information access, and using technical or cyber means to undermine information/communication controls in authoritarian states. Doing so offers an opportunity for the United States and its democratic allies to balance authoritarian state practices designed to manipulate the open information environments of democratic societies, with a tool that targets authoritarian regimes' reliance on information control to maintain power.

Deterring an adversary requires, at the most fundamental level, understanding the adversary. Threatening to isolate an adversary that craves isolation, for example, is unlikely to produce benefits for US policy makers, as borne out by decades of failure to achieve US policy aims in North Korea.

The United States faces similarly counterproductive risks when attempting to deter asymmetric challenges from China and Russia. A common view, supported by both precedent and scholarship, is that military capabilities are effective at deterrence. Our research supports these earlier findings—US and allies' military capabilities clearly produce negative reactions in Moscow and Beijing. Unfortunately, the scope of these earlier findings is too narrow; they fail to provide the insight required to understand and then effectively deter challenges beyond the military tools of statecraft.

Instead, Washington requires a broader understanding of which instruments of national power can deter a broad spectrum of economic, diplomatic, and political challenges from adversary states. Using a unique new methodology and an approach

that examines all instruments of national power, we develop several key findings that will assist US senior leaders and policy makers attempting to deter authoritarian states:

- military instruments, especially exercises near adversary borders, can harm US deterrence goals by inadvertently supporting the leadership in Beijing and Moscow;
- economic instruments, chiefly sanctions, produce little reaction—the international relations equivalent of a yawn—while possibly also supporting the leadership in the targeted regimes;
- information instruments, sometimes in conjunction with diplomatic instruments, can produce the most negative reactions by the targeted states and appear to be an underutilized tool for asymmetric deterrence of authoritarian states, specifically China and Russia.¹

We develop these findings below, first through a brief look at deterrence. Then, after an overview of our approach and methodology, we apply our methods to case studies of China and Russia. Finally, we conclude with a discussion and policy recommendations for more effectively attaining US goals, including deterrence, regarding authoritarian adversaries.

Deterrence

Recent developments in deterrence scholarship, often dubbed “fourth-generation deterrence theory,” feature a broad spectrum of foreign policy tools, including nonmilitary practices designed “to penetrate democratic society” for the “[manipulation of] other states’ strategic interests.”² These challenges have sparked discussions among practitioners, strategists, and scholars. In 2017, former Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper observed that current deterrence/punishment tools have created a “permissive environment” for hostile activity because they lack an ability to deter mid-spectrum actions—those that fall short of war but rise above minor annoyances.³

The 2022 US *National Security Strategy* (NSS) recognizes this challenge and proposes developing and deploying integrated deterrence as “the seamless combination of capabilities to convince potential adversaries that the costs of their

¹ The authors find similar patterns for North Korea and Iran. Please contact authors for information.

² Mikael Wigell, “Democratic Deterrence: How to Dissuade Hybrid Interference,” *Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2021), 51. See also Nicole J. Jackson, “Deterrence, Resilience and Hybrid Wars: The Case of Canada and NATO,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 104–25, <https://jmss.org/>.

³ Quoted in Lucas Kello, *The Virtual Weapon and International Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 206.

hostile activities outweigh their benefits.”⁴ The 2022 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) adds further details, “Integrated deterrence entails working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of US national power, and our network of Alliances [sic] and partnerships. Tailored to specific circumstances, it applies a coordinated, multifaceted approach to reducing competitors’ perceptions of the net benefits of aggression relative to restraint.”⁵

An organization cannot tailor activities to specific circumstances without a thorough understanding of the adversary. Our research assists this process by developing tools and methods that allow policy makers to better understand how authoritarian states, specifically China and Russia, perceive and react to US deterrence activities.

Methodology and Data

By analyzing which foreign policy tools create the most and least negative reactions in Beijing and Moscow, this article addresses three critical questions:

1. What, if any, foreign policy tools are effective at deterring asymmetric challenges from authoritarian states?
2. How can deterrence effectiveness be measured?
3. What variations exist between countries in how they respond to Washington’s use of foreign policy tools?

Because of its portability across the academic and policy communities, we used the diplomacy, information, military, and economic (DIME) framework to conduct our analysis. Here the specific focus was which US foreign policy tools created the strongest responses in Beijing and Moscow. Measuring how states respond involved three key components:

1. Data, specifically information capable of effectively illustrating what states say or do.
2. A method for analyzing this data that can produce baselines and detect any variations from the baseline tied to specific activities.

⁴ *National Security Strategy* (Washington: The White House, October 2022), 22, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

⁵ *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: DOD, 2022), 1, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

3. An understanding that actions taken to deter can involve “apples-to-oranges” comparisons, for example, an actor may attempt a diplomatic and/or economic activity to deter a military activity.⁶

We amassed a dataset comprising more than 1.6 million articles spanning from 2000 to 2022, sourced from English-language publications of the Chinese and Russian ministries of foreign affairs (MOFA) and specific state-controlled media outlets.⁷ This data collection was funded by a grant from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and is accessible to the public.⁸ We focused on English-language articles because China and Russia—like many non-English-speaking countries—allocate resources for English publications to advance their respective state strategic narratives.

This collection of open-source data is well-suited for big data analytic tools, specifically sentiment analysis⁹ because it computationally measures and quantifies “opinion, sentiment, and subjectivity in text.”¹⁰ Applying sentiment analysis to government reports and state media articles, or a government’s every mention of a subject, quantifies official state opinion and allowed us to establish a country’s

⁶ See Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay, eds., *Cross-Domain Deterrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) for more on ‘apples to oranges’ deterrence tools.

⁷ Our data consists of the following:

Global Times (China): 677,532 articles, from 2009–2022

People’s Daily (China): 544,940 articles, from 2007–2022

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA): 2,607 articles, from 2000–2022

Russia Today (Russia): 291,515 articles from 2006–2022

Sputnik (Russia): 136,469 articles, from 2019–2022

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA): 23,424 articles from 2004–2022

⁸ See Scott Fisher and Graig Klein, “FOCUSdata Project: Foreign Official Communication Using Sentiment Data,” Harvard Dataverse, n.d., <https://focusdatapoint.com>.

⁹ This is a critical tool for studying the narratives states are attempting to propagate, but it is a relatively underutilized methodology in international relations. Analysis typically involves converting text data into a Likert-scale positive-neutral-negative numerical range. For our sentiment analysis, we used the AFINN package in R and used R Studio. AFINN is a standard sentiment analysis tool/dictionary used in the social sciences, see Finn Årup Nielsen, “A new ANEW: Evaluation of a word list for sentiment analysis in microblogs,” in Proceedings of the ESWC2011 Workshop on ‘Making Sense of Microposts’: Big Things Come in Small Packages 2011, 93–98, <https://core.ac.uk/>. It is not an acronym.

¹⁰ Bo Pang and Lillian Lee, “Opinion Mining and Sentiment Analysis,” *Foundations and Trends in Information Retrieval* 2, no. 1–2 (2008), 6, <https://www.cs.cornell.edu/>.

baseline, detect and compare responses to DIME framework tools, and conduct quantitative analyses to identify statistically significant patterns.¹¹

To capture Chinese and Russian reactions to different DIME tools, we systematically selected and measured the sentiment of key terms and events.¹² *Diplomatic* terms reflect UN resolutions that target China or Russia. Important *information* terms are based on previous research and *military* terms reflect bilateral and multi-lateral exercises. *Economic* terms reflect sanctions in general and specific sanctions levied by the United States and others (e.g., European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization member states). Table 1 includes the search terms for both countries. If a document referenced the search term, we used AFINN sentiment analysis values to classify the document as very negative, negative, neutral, positive, or very positive. We then conducted Chi-Square and Difference of Means statistical tests analyzing the distribution of sentiment frequency and average sentiment, respectively, across the documents per country within each DIME tool category. We are not directly testing China and Russia against one another; so, differences in search terms or the number of articles per country did not influence the statistical tests.

Table 1. DIME Framework Search Terms

DIME Tools	China	Russia
Diplomatic	UN Human Rights Special Rapporteur Uyghur Human Rights Policy	UN Human Rights UN General Assembly START Treaty
Information	Freedom House Reporters Without Borders	Freedom House Reporters Without Borders
Military	Ulchi RIMPAC Keen Sword Han Kuang Balikatan AUKUS Arms Sales	Baltops Cold Response Hedgehog
Economic	Economic Sanctions Huawei	Economic Sanctions

¹¹ Kumar Ravi and Vadlamani Ravi, “A Survey on Opinion Mining and Sentiment Analysis: Tasks, Approaches and Applications,” *Knowledge-Based Systems* 89 (November 2015): 14–46, <https://doi.org/>; Liu, Bing. 2011. *Web Data Mining: Exploring Hyperlinks, Contents, and Usage Data*. 2nd ed. Heidelberg; New York: Springer; Liu, Bing. 2020. *Sentiment Analysis: Mining Sentiments, Opinions, and Emotions*, Second Edition. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

¹² Ibid; see also Fisher, “Testing the Importance of Information Control,” *Journal of Information Warfare* 18, no. 1: 23–38; Fisher et al., “FOCUSdata: Foreign Policy Through Language & Sentiment,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*.

Our approach is replicable, applicable to other countries, and adaptable, i.e., by expanding or changing the search terms. This provides a useful new tool for predicting which activities under which instruments of national power are most or least likely to achieve a desired deterrence effect for a particular country.

China Case Study

Key findings:

1. The information tool in DIME clearly stings Beijing and represents an underutilized instrument for deterring or countering China, as well as other authoritarian regimes. Such states tend to react quite negatively to criticism of domestic information controls.
2. Criticism of Beijing's human rights record and domestic information controls generated strongly negative reactions. This "naming and shaming"—e.g., UN investigations and nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports criticizing domestic information controls—deserves additional attention from policy makers.¹³
3. Beijing reacted more negatively to criticisms of its human rights and press freedom policies than it did to Taiwanese military exercises—including iterations of those exercises that involved the US military.
4. Starting in 2021, the Chinese MOFA turned very negative regarding the South China Sea. This shift could indicate decreased acceptance by Beijing of narratives or activities that challenge its official claims in the region.

We explore these and related findings below. As a starting point, we emphasize that baseline sentiment is positive in the *Global Times* (54.2 percent), *People's Daily* (58.2 percent), and Foreign Ministry (87.2 percent) data. When discussing the key search terms in table 1, in all three sources, there was significant variation across DIME tools in sentiment and how often sources addressed a specific tool. There were variations and statistically significant patterns that indicated strategic reactions, decision making, and therefore, opportunities to learn about customized DIME-based deterrence strategies.¹⁴

¹³ Fisher, 2018 identifies similar patterns in North Korea.

¹⁴ We categorize identified articles into crisp sets and conduct Chi-Square Tests for each data source. All three Chinese open-source information sources produce statistically significant tests, which indicates that how China discusses different DIME framework elements is not random, rather it is calculated and suggests strategic decision-making dictates how China responds to or discusses the key search terms. Complete results are available upon request.

Rather surprisingly, when China discussed joint military exercises, the average sentiment was positive in all three sources. This suggests that deterrence through traditional force projection or brinksmanship may be less effective than many may assume. When discussing economic tools, the average sentiment scores for both *Global Times* and *People's Daily* were also positive. Conversely when those sources discussed diplomatic and information tools, the average sentiment was negative. These differences in average sentiment are statistically significant.¹⁵

Notably, China's MOFA remains positive across all four tools, but here too there was statistically significant variation in *how* it talked about each DIME tool. Overall, China is less sensitive—it responded less negatively and more positively—to economic sanctions and most military exercises than it did to the diplomatic and information tools of the DIME framework.

Below, we analyze the DIME tools and present key research findings in D-I-M-E order. We conclude with a summary before transitioning to the Russia case study. As needed or beneficial, we incorporate data visualizations to express or clarify our findings.

Diplomatic

Overall, China consistently expressed criticism toward diplomatic efforts and engagements in its discourse within state-controlled media and through the MOFA. In fact, while still using primarily positive sentiment, MOFA communications discussing diplomatic tools yielded the lowest sentiment within the DIME framework. Notably, at a statistically significant rate, *People's Daily* and *Global Times* diplomatic sentiment is more negative (i.e., lower) than military and economic sentiment;¹⁶ MOFA diplomatic sentiment is lower than military and economic sentiment.¹⁷ Specifically, *People's Daily* diplomatic sentiment is 220.3 percent lower than its baseline sentiment, *Global Times*'s is 394.0 percent lower, and the Foreign Ministry's is 93.5 percent lower.¹⁸

Below are examples from *People's Daily* and *Global Times* illustrating state media reactions to discussions of Beijing's Uyghur human rights policy in comparison to baseline sentiment. The first image depicts baseline sentiment encompassing all

¹⁵ Analysis is based on two-sample t-tests specifying unequal variances between the samples. This accounts for the variation or imbalance in the number of observations for different DIME search terms within each data source. Using the crisp set classifications, Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic sentiment scores are calculated and compared to one another. Complete results are available upon request.

¹⁶ Statistically significant at a 99 percent confidence level.

¹⁷ Statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence level.

¹⁸ All three are statistically significant differences at a 99.9 percent confidence level.

articles; the second image for each source is specific to Uyghur human rights. Note the clear, negative changes from the baselines. The MOFA rarely discussed the term (N=2), thus related visualizations are omitted.

Global Times AFINN Baseline

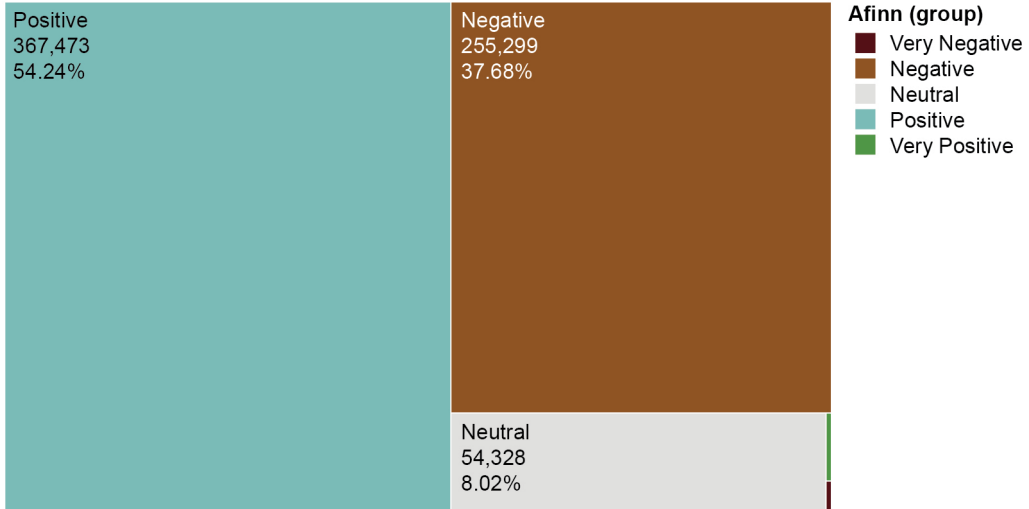


Figure 1. Global Times AFINN baseline

Global Times 'Uyghur Human Rights Policy'

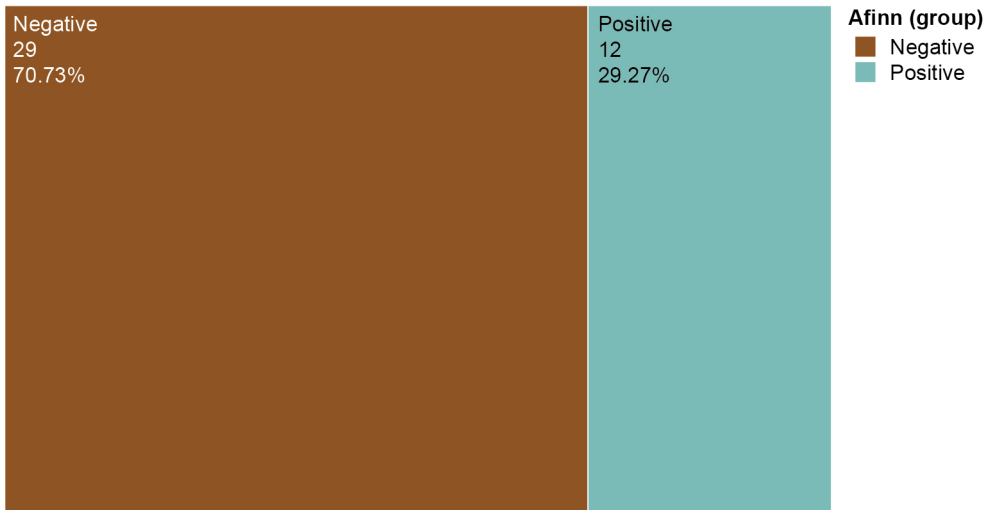


Figure 2. Global Times Uyghur human rights policy

People's Daily AFINN Baseline

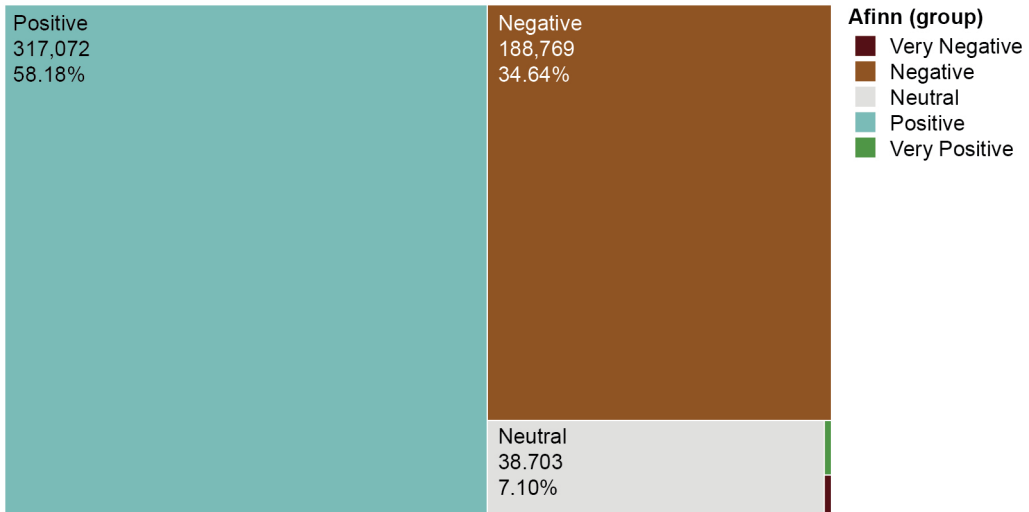


Figure 3. People's Daily AFINN baseline

People's Daily 'Uyghur Human Rights Policy'

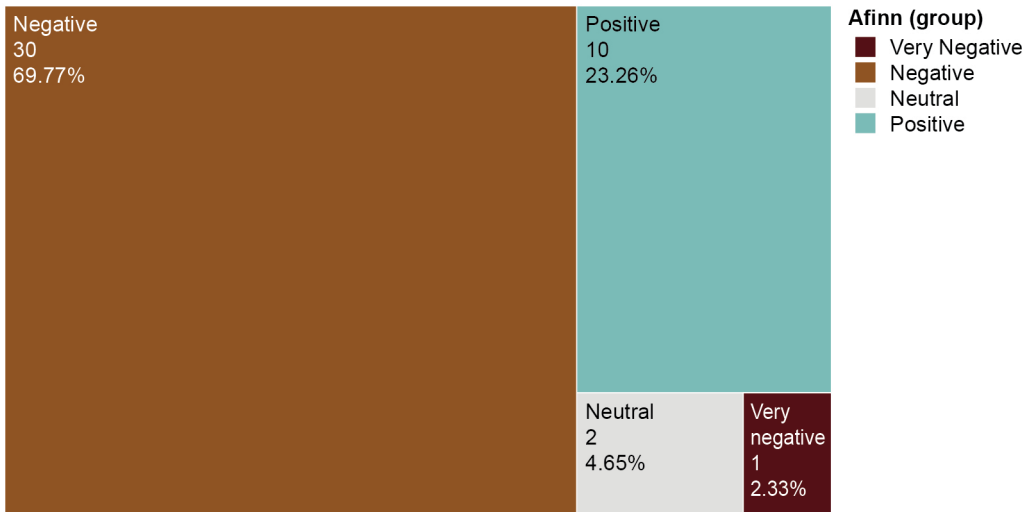


Figure 4. People's Daily Uyghur human rights policy

We also note a recent change in the Chinese MOFA sentiment regarding mentions of the South China Sea. Starting in 2021, the MOFA took a very negative turn when discussing the South China Sea. Our database includes 2,607 MOFA

articles dating to 2000 and contains 48 “very negative” articles. Out of those 22 years with 48 very negative articles, 13 (27 percent) are from 2021 and 2022 and mention the South China Sea. This is a significant outlier and sudden change versus the baseline. While further investigation is necessary, this finding could indicate decreased acceptance by Beijing of narratives or activities that challenge its official claims in the region and may presage additional activities to protect its claims—activities that will likely conflict with the United States and its regional partners.

Information

China displays a notable sensitivity toward information tools. International reports regarding the country’s human rights practices elicited the most negative average sentiment across DIME tools for both the *Global Times* and *People’s Daily*. The MOFA rarely discussed the key search terms in table 1; thus, analysis is restricted to the *Global Times* and *People’s Daily*. At a statistically significant rate, *People’s Daily* information sentiment is more negative (i.e., lower) than diplomatic sentiment.¹⁹ Average information sentiment in the *Global Times* is not statistically different than average diplomatic sentiment. The *People’s Daily* and *Global Times* information sentiment is more negative than military and economic sentiment.²⁰ Specifically, the *People’s Daily* information sentiment is 331.4 percent lower than its baseline sentiment, and the *Global Times*’ is 401.2 percent lower.²¹

Military

On average, China’s sentiment about the military tools of DIME was positive. The exceptions were US military exercises with South Korea and Taiwanese exercises that the US military occasionally, but not always, joins. Reactions to these exercises tended to be more negative compared to other exercises, although they were generally less negative than responses to diplomatic and information tools.

At a statistically significant rate, the *People’s Daily* and *Global Times* military sentiment is higher (and more positive) than diplomatic and information sentiment,²² MOFA military sentiment is higher than diplomatic sentiment,²³ but the military sentiment is based on a very small sample. The *People’s Daily* and *Global Times* military sentiment are 16.9 percent and 3.6 percent lower, respectively, and are not

¹⁹ Statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence level.

²⁰ Statistically significant at a 99 percent confidence level.

²¹ Both are statistically significant at a 99.9 percent confidence level.

²² Statistically significant at a 99 percent confidence level.

²³ Statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence level.

statistically significantly different than their baseline sentiment. The MOFA's sentiment is 49.5 percent lower and statistically different compared to its baseline.²⁴

Beijing reacted more negatively to criticisms of its human rights and press freedom policies than it does to Taiwanese military exercises—including iterations of those exercises that involve the US military. Based on the authors' previous research involving Russia and North Korea, China's overall lukewarm response to military exercises is not atypical. Though it requires further research to confirm, our initial suspicion of the cause of these findings—that authoritarian states respond less negatively than expected to nearby military exercises held by competitors—is that outside threats actually align with regime narratives of external threats and calls for national unity. Effectively, these exercises can be perceived as bolstering regime narratives and nationalist appeals.

To illustrate these findings, below we compare baseline sentiment from the *Global Times* with articles discussing Reporter's without Borders' activities and then Taiwan's Han Kuang military exercises (that sometimes include the US military). Note the differences with the baseline, then between the two instruments.

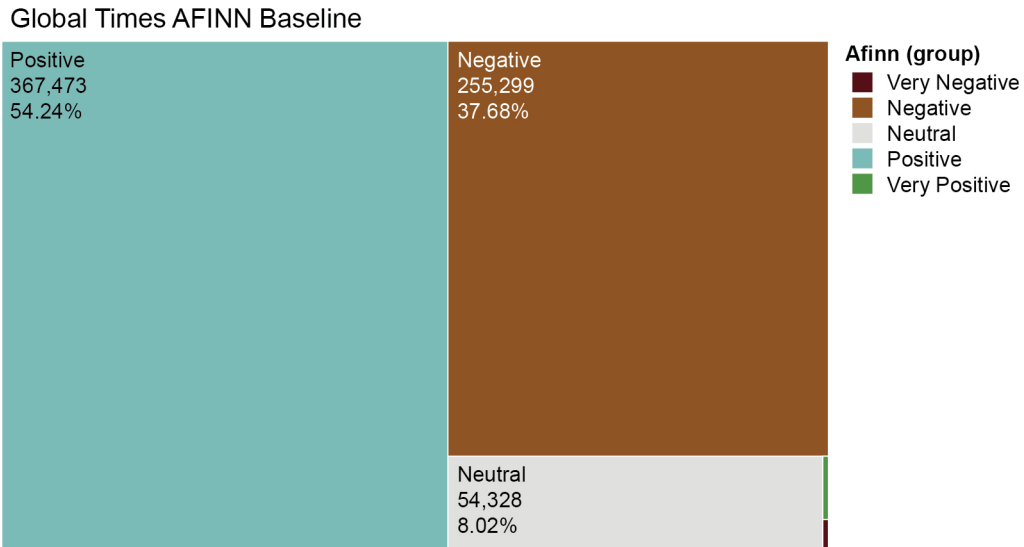


Figure 5. *Global Times* AFINN baseline

²⁴ Statically significance decrease at a 99.9 percent confidence level.

Global Times 'Reporters without Borders'



Figure 6. *Global Times* Reporters without Borders

Global Times 'Han Kuang'

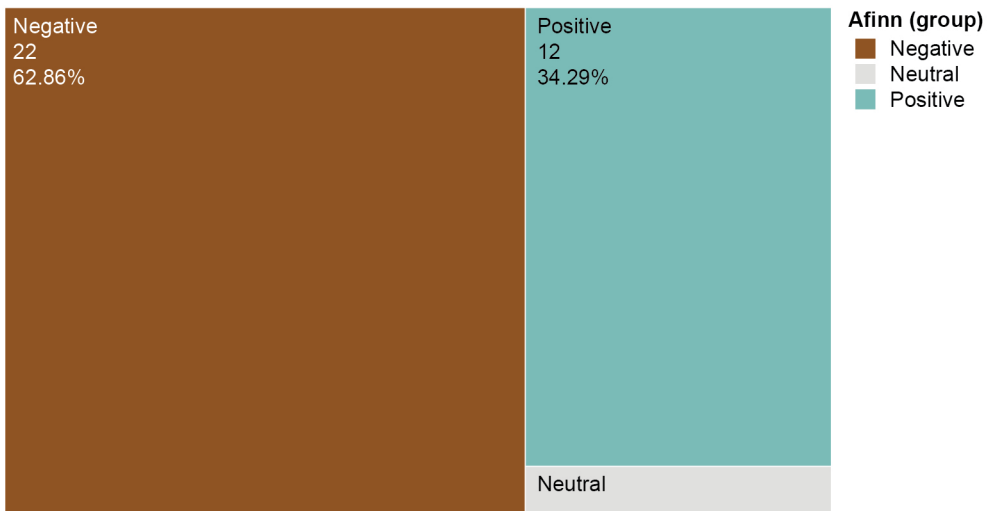


Figure 7. *Global Times* Han Kuang

Economic

In both *People's Daily* and *Global Times*, economic sentiment registered the highest (most positive) average sentiment. At a statistically significant rate, *People's Daily* and *Global Times* economic sentiment is more positive (i.e., higher) than diplomatic, information, and military sentiment.²⁵ Furthermore, the MOFA economic sentiment is higher than diplomatic sentiment and is not statistically different than military sentiment.²⁶ Specifically, the *People's Daily* and *Global Times* economic sentiment are 100.8 percent and 78.3 percent higher, respectively, than baseline sentiment, and the MOFA's sentiment is 50.7 percent lower, all of which are statistically significant differences.²⁷

Summary

Our findings bear clear relevance for policy makers. Information tools, sometimes in combination with diplomatic tools, generate the most negative average sentiment. This suggests an underutilization of this tool in deterring or influencing Beijing. We also identified two surprising patterns. First, naming and shaming provokes a more negative reaction in China compared to military exercises involving the US and neighboring states, including US involvement in Taiwanese military exercises. Second, while economic sanctions were expected to evoke anger and higher rates of negative sentiment from China, we found a muted impact.

Russia Case Study

Key findings:

1. Information tools provoked a stronger negative response compared to diplomatic, military, or economic tools—including NATO military exercises and economic sanctions.²⁸ Recent updates to our research materials validate earlier findings.
2. Criticism from human rights NGOs—such as Reporters without Borders and Freedom House—elicited a very negative response. This finding aligns

²⁵ Statistically significant at a 99 percent confidence level.

²⁶ Statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence level.

²⁷ Statistically significant at a 99.9 percent confidence level.

²⁸ See Barry et al., "Avoiding the Spotlight," *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3: 532-544; Murdie and Peksen, "The Impact of Human Rights INGO Shaming on Sanctions," *The Review of International Organizations* 8, no. 1: 33-53; Woo and Murdie, "International Organizations and Naming and Shaming," *Political Studies* 65, no. 4: 767-85; Fisher, "Testing the Importance of Information Control," *Journal of Information Warfare* 18, no. 1: 23-38; Fisher et al., "FOCUSdata: Foreign Policy Through Language & Sentiment."

with findings in our China case study regarding authoritarian state sensitivities to naming and shaming.

3. Moscow displayed minimal reaction to diplomatic tools. For example, sentiment was often near or even more positive than baseline sentiment regarding United Nations resolutions criticizing Moscow. However, Russia exhibited a notably more negative response to the UN General Assembly's (UNGA) criticism of its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine compared to other diplomatic tools and baseline sentiment.

We explore these and related findings below. As a starting point, we emphasize that in *Russia Today* stands at 65 percent negative, while in *Sputnik*, it stands at 62.9 percent negative. This is a marked difference from China's state-controlled media outlets, which exhibit positive baselines. The majority of Russian MOFA sentiment is positive (66.6 percent). Once again, there existed significant variation across DIME tools in sentiment and how often sources addressed a specific tool. This variability indicates strategic reactions, decision making processes, and consequently, opportunities to consider customized DIME-based deterrence strategies.²⁹

When discussing diplomatic and economic tools, the average sentiment for both *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* is negative, whereas Russia's MOFA remains positive. When *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* discuss joint military exercises, the average sentiment is negative. Across all three data sources, the average sentiment is negative when discussing information components. These differences in average sentiment are statistically significant.³⁰ Overall, Russia was extremely sensitive—it responded more negatively—to information than it did to diplomatic, military, and economic DIME tools.

²⁹ We categorize identified articles into crisp sets and conduct Chi-Square Tests for each data source. All three Chinese open-source information sources produce statistically significant tests, which indicates that how China discusses different DIME framework elements is not random, rather it is calculated and suggests strategic decision-making dictates how China responds to or discusses the key search terms. Complete results are available upon request.

³⁰ Analysis is based on two-sample t-tests specifying unequal variances between the samples. This accounts for the variation or imbalance in the number of observations for different DIME search terms within each data source. Complete results are available upon request.

We explore the findings in greater detail below; as in the China section, through a D–I–M–E order. Where necessary or helpful, we add data visualizations to help express or clarify our findings.

Diplomatic

Following diplomatic protocol appears to be the standard practice for *Sputnik* and the MOFA, as the average sentiment of the former is the least negative of the four DIME tools and positive for the MOFA.³¹ *Russia Today* also uses comparatively less negative sentiment. Across all three sources, diplomatic sentiment is statistically significantly higher (i.e., more positive/less negative) than information sentiment, but no different than military sentiment.³² *Sputnik* uses statistically significant higher (less negative) diplomatic sentiment than economic sentiment.³³ *Russia Today's* diplomatic sentiment is 26.7 percent lower than its baseline sentiment; *Sputnik's* is 46.6 percent higher, and the MOFA's is 16.4 percent higher.³⁴

An interesting example of Russian views on diplomatic criticism is seen in reference to the UNGA. Nearly 75 percent of Russian MOFA articles mentioning the UNGA use positive sentiment, but in March 2022 when the UNGA adopted a resolution calling for Russia to end its invasion of Ukraine, 50 percent of MOFA articles mentioning UNGA that month were negative. In *Sputnik* and *Russia Today*, which primarily discuss the UNGA negatively, there was also an increase, 33.2 percent and 14.7 percent, respectively, in negative sentiment in March 2022.³⁵ We use visualizations below to illustrate these findings; the first image for each source (the MOFA, *Russia Today*, *Sputnik*) is general sentiment regarding the UNGA. The second image for each source is specific to sentiment toward the UNGA in March 2022. Additional research and data are required to better understand these changes.

³¹ Only military sentiment records a higher average for Russia's Foreign Ministry, but only one document was identified in the executed procedure.

³² Statistically significant at a 99.9 percent confidence level.

³³ Statistically significant at a 99.9 percent confidence level.

³⁴ All are statistically significant differences at a 99.9 percent confidence level.

³⁵ Cf. UN, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12407.doc.htm>.

Russia MOFA UN General Assembly

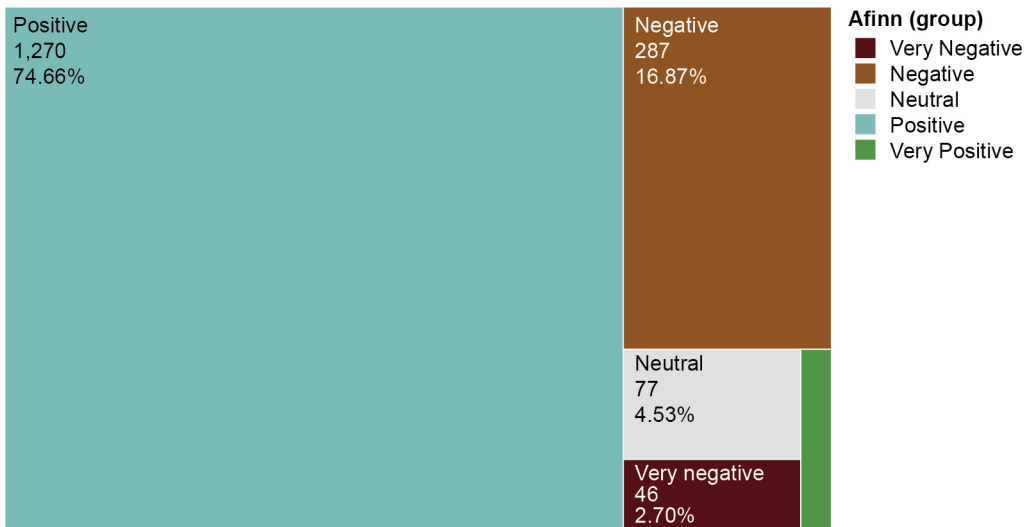


Figure 8. Russia MOFA UN General Assembly

Russia MOFA UN General Assembly March 2022

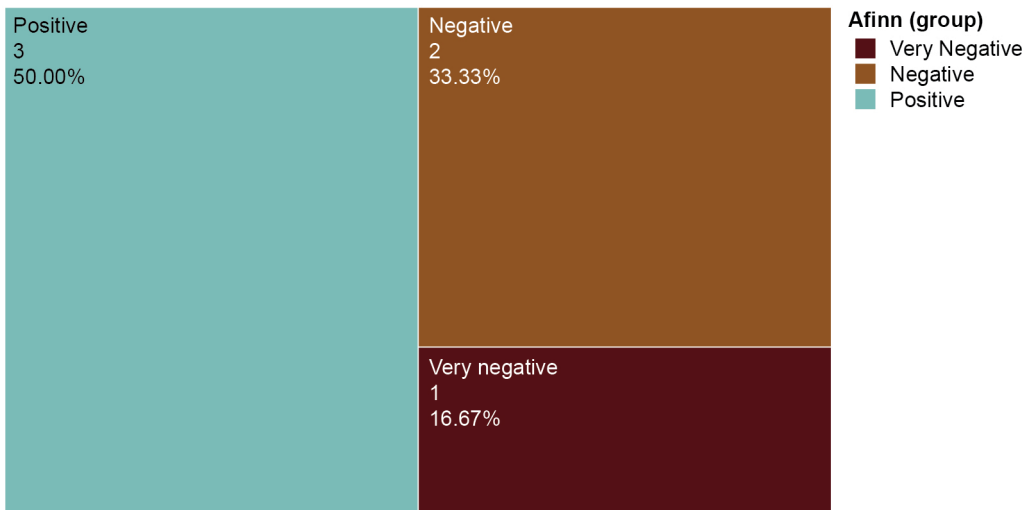


Figure 9. Russia MOFA UN General Assembly March 2022

RT UN General Assembly

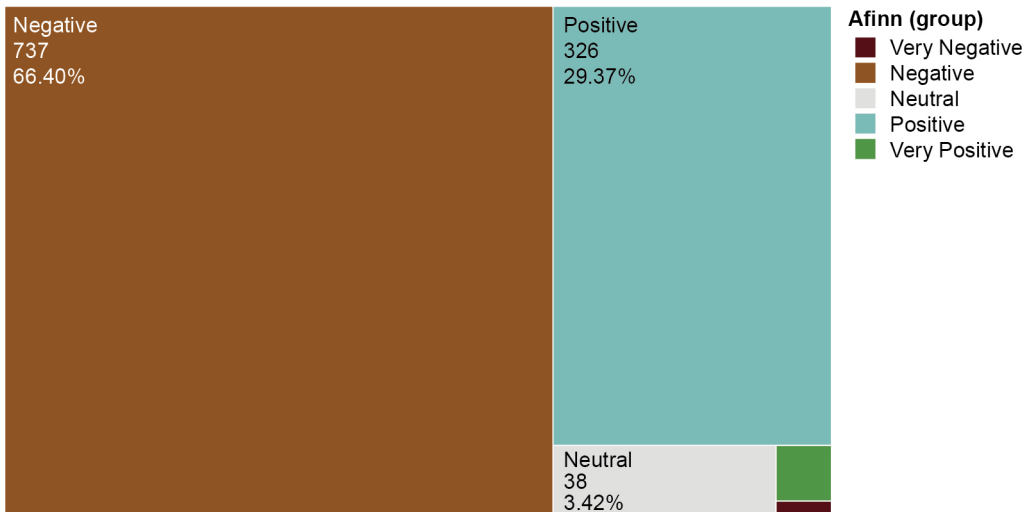


Figure 10. *Russia Today* UN General Assembly

RT UN General Assembly March 2022

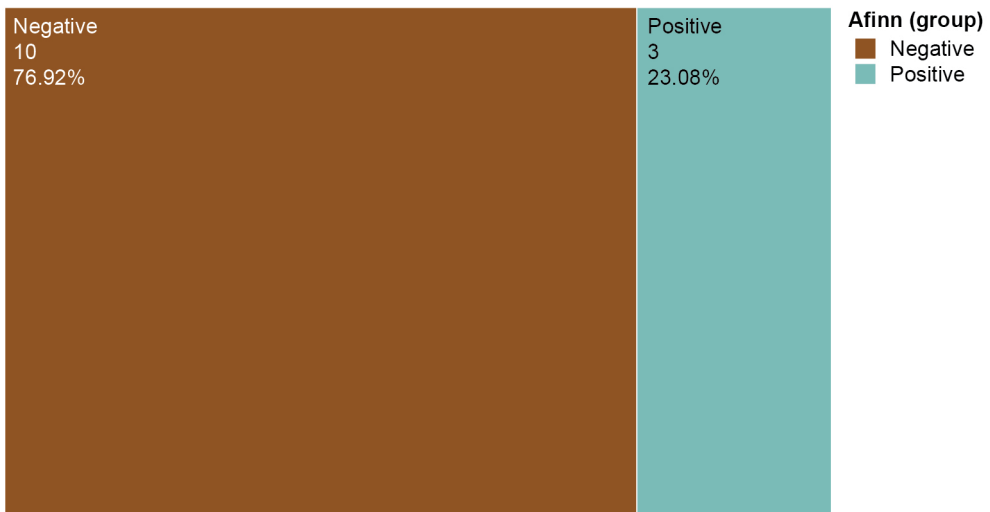


Figure 11. *Russia Today* UN General Assembly March 2022

Sputnik UN General Assembly

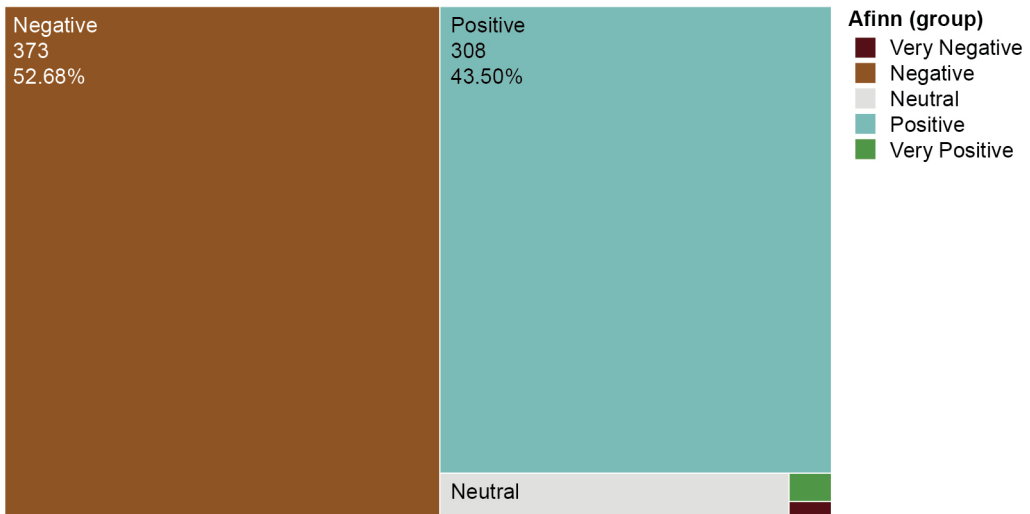


Figure 12. *Sputnik UN General Assembly*

Sputnik UN General Assembly March 2022

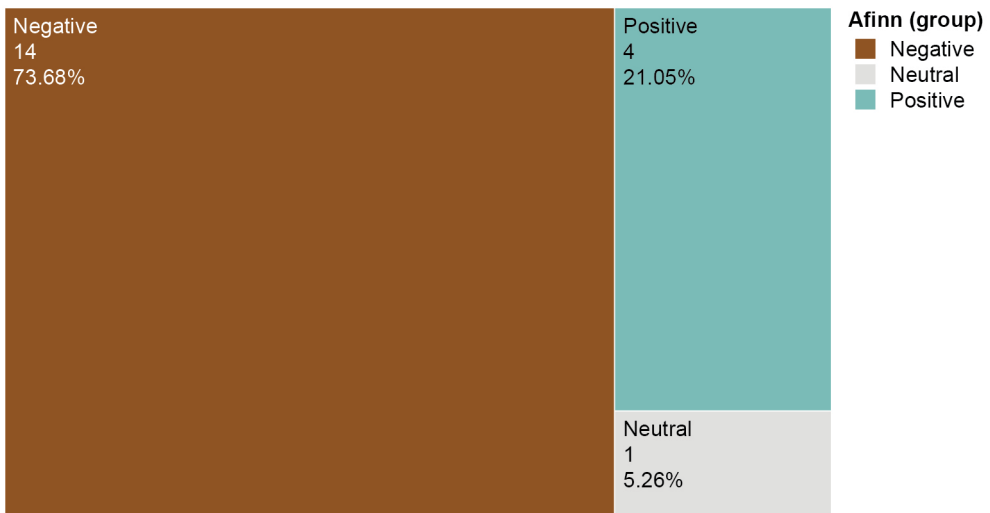


Figure 13. *Sputnik UN General Assembly March 2022*

Information

Russia is extremely sensitive to information tools. For *Russia Today*, *Sputnik*, and the MOFA, international reports about the country's human rights practices generated the most negative average sentiment across DIME tools, a finding that supports previous research by the authors.³⁶ At a statistically significant rate, information sentiment in all three sources is more negative (i.e., lower) than diplomatic sentiment.³⁷ In *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* information sentiment is more negative than military sentiment.³⁸ Average information sentiment is lower than economic sentiment in *Russia Today*,³⁹ *Sputnik*,⁴⁰ and the MOFA.⁴¹ *Russia Today's* information sentiment is 88.1 percent lower, *Sputnik's* is 119.9 percent lower, and the MOFA's is 251.2 percent lower, compared to their baseline sentiment, respectively.⁴²

As noted in the China section, authoritarian states often react negatively to criticisms of their human rights records. Russia appears to be particularly responsive to reports of a lack of press freedom, as the MOFA's, *Sputnik's*, and *Russia Today's* negative sentiment is 39.4 percent, 30.0 percent, and 28.0 percent higher than their respective baselines regarding related reports from press freedom and international human rights NGOs (e.g., Reporters without Borders, Freedom House). The visualizations below illustrate this increased negativity; also note the relatively high levels of very negative sentiment.

³⁶ Fisher et al., "FOCUSdata: Foreign Policy Through Language & Sentiment;" Fisher, "Testing the Importance of Information Control," *Journal of Information Warfare* 18, no. 1: 23–38.

³⁷ Statistically significant at a 99.9 percent confidence level.

³⁸ Statistically significant at a 99 percent confidence level.

³⁹ Statistically significant at a 99.9 percent confidence level.

⁴⁰ Statistically significant at a 90 percent confidence level.

⁴¹ Statistically significant at a 99 percent confidence level.

⁴² All are statistically significant differences at a 99.9 percent confidence level.

Russia MOFA Reporters Without Borders

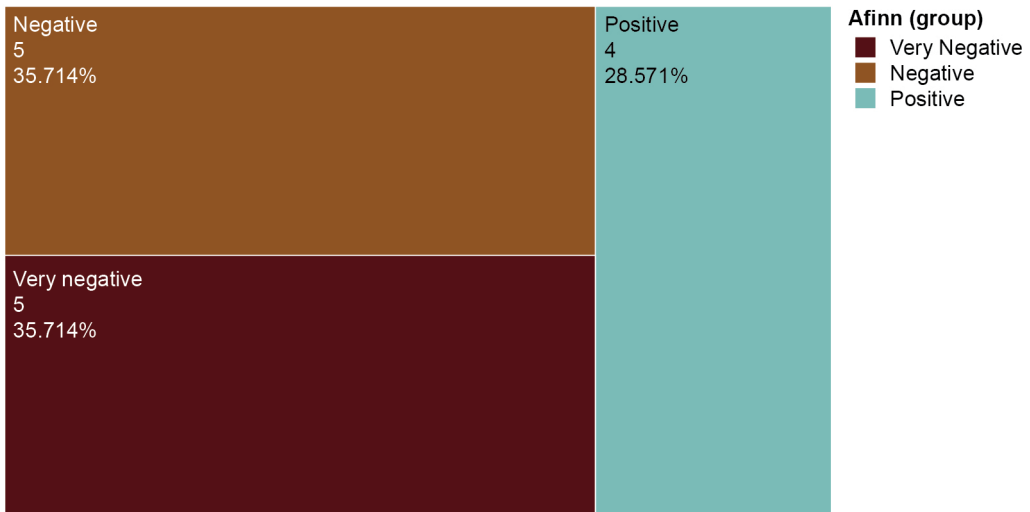


Figure 14. Russia MOFA Reporters Without Borders

RT Reporters Without Borders

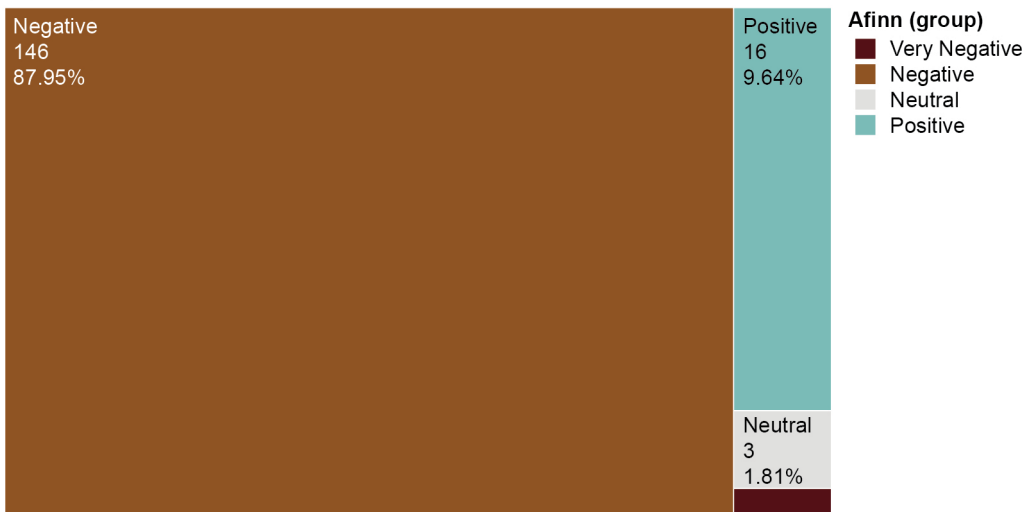


Figure 15. Russia Today Reporters Without Borders

Sputnik Reporters Without Borders

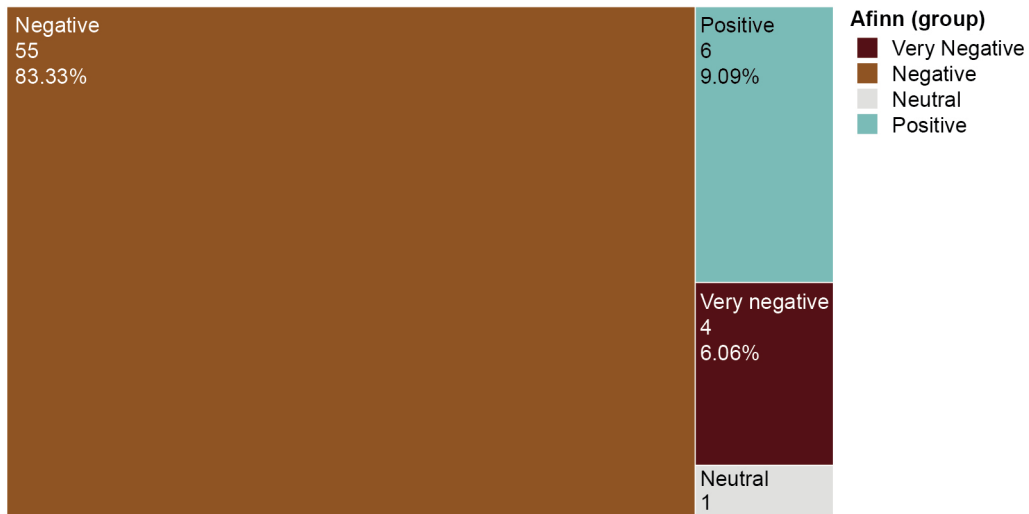


Figure 16. *Sputnik Reporters without Borders*

Military

Compared to their baseline sentiment, *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* are less negative (but not statistically different) when discussing US military activities (2.8 percent and 26.0 percent, respectively). Military sentiment is statistically significantly less negative than economic sentiment in *Sputnik*⁴³ and less negative than information sentiment in both.⁴⁴ Our Russia MOFA data only records one article referencing the searched military tools, so we focus our analysis on *Sputnik* and *Russia Today*. These findings are similar to the China section and match previous research by the authors.⁴⁵ Below we include visualizations of the exercise that generated the most negative content—Baltic Operations (BALTOPS).⁴⁶

⁴³ Statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence level.

⁴⁴ Statistically significant at a 99 percent confidence level.

⁴⁵ Ibid, plus Fisher, “Testing the Importance of Information Control to Pyongyang: How North Korea Reacts to the Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic Tools of Statecraft.” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 27, no. 2 (2018): 67–111

⁴⁶ Cf. NATO, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_196240.htm.

RT Baltops

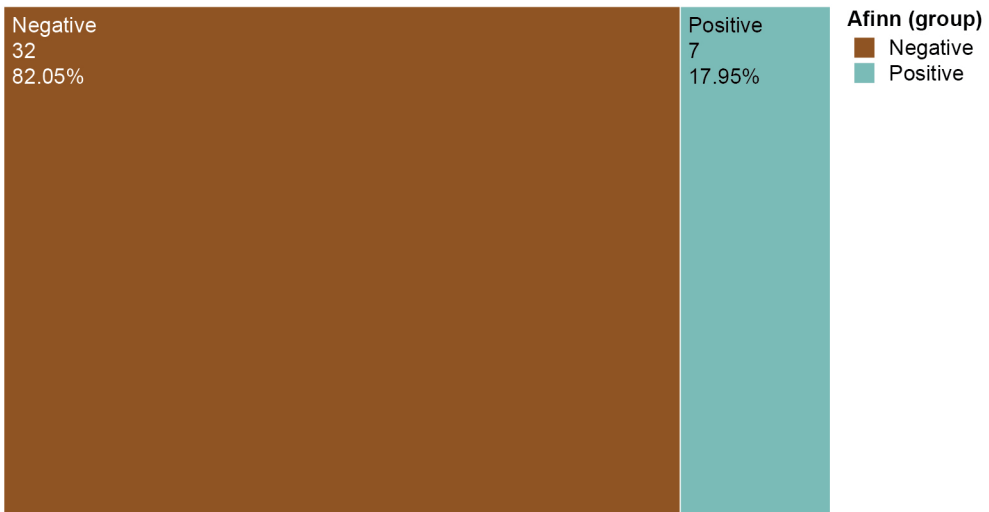


Figure 17. *Russia Today* Baltops

Sputnik Baltops

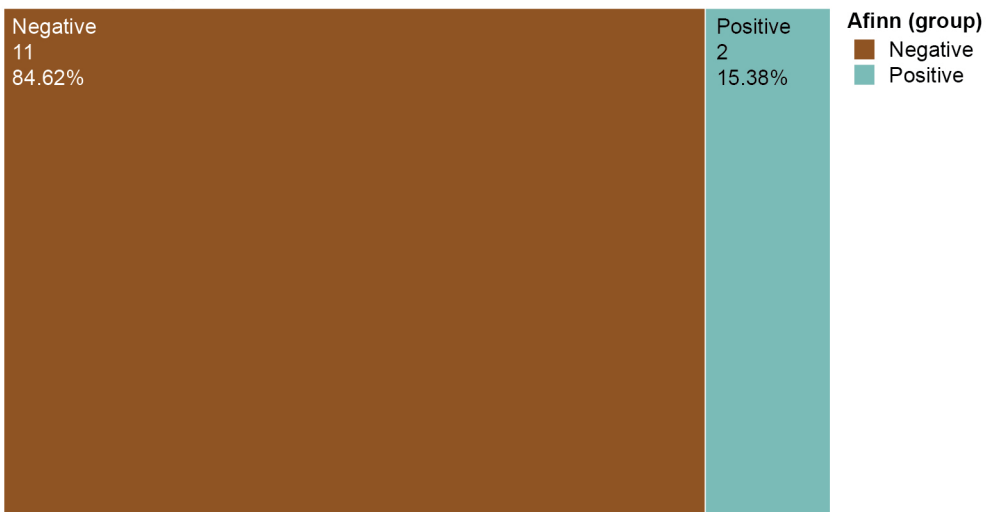


Figure 18. *Sputnik* Baltops

Further research is required to better understand why Russia and China react to competitors or adversaries conducting nearby military exercises less negatively than many would expect or predict. Our working theory to explain this finding is

that adversaries using military tools and conducting exercises supports regime narratives of outside threats and are viewed less negatively than tools like information that threaten regime narratives and information controls, thereby threatening the regime itself.

Economic

Russia Today's economic sentiment is 32.4 percent lower than its baseline sentiment, *Sputnik's* is 65.8 percent lower, and the MOFA's is 49.3 percent lower.⁴⁷ In the three sources, average economic sentiment is less negative (i.e., higher) than information sentiment, but only in *Sputnik* is economic sentiment statistically different and lower (more negative) than diplomatic and military sentiment.⁴⁸ *Sputnik* appears to be the mouthpiece for critical and negative economic sentiment. Though economic sanctions generated a negative response from Russian state media, the strength of the response was less than some of the other DIME tools or combinations.

Summary

The findings from the Russia case study echo those from China—criticism of human rights practices, including censorship and access to information, badly stings Moscow and Beijing. Military tools, especially given Russia's oft-discussed animosity toward NATO, were expected to produce greater effects than those shown here. However, as with the research into China, and previous research into North Korea and Iran, authoritarian states react very negatively to tools that threaten state narratives and domestic information controls, but military threats can serve to reinforce regime narratives of external threats, possibly benefiting the very leadership elements that the military exercises were designed to target.

Recommendations

Information tools can generate powerful responses by Beijing and Moscow. These tools are so powerful that an NGO report can generate a stronger response than a multinational military exercise. This is not to say traditional notions of deterrence are unimportant; military capabilities and nuclear weapons retain their ability to deter. What our research highlights is that beyond traditional concepts of deterrence, what the current national security and defense strategies label *inte-*

⁴⁷ The differences in state-controlled media sentiment are statistically significant at a 99.9 percent confidence level and at a 95 percent confidence in the Foreign Ministry's sentiment.

⁴⁸ Statistically significant, respectively, at 99.9 percent and 95 percent confidence levels.

grated deterrence, lie tools and capabilities that can help policy makers confront asymmetric, nonmilitary challenges from authoritarian states.

For authoritarians, much more than their democratic peers, control of information is vital for regime preservation. Control of information—not just a dominant narrative but controlling the actual networks—allows authoritarians to successfully rationalize poor economic performance, identify and mitigate potential or actual opposition, decrease protests, and increase the overall durability of the regime.⁴⁹ For these reasons, challenges to authoritarian information control can generate the powerfully negative results we consistently see in our research.

For US leaders and policy makers attempting to deter, confront, or punish asymmetric challenges from China, Russia, and other authoritarian states, information tools offer a powerful capability. This is less about constructing specific narratives—modern information environments contain multitudes of narratives and efforts to outperform native Chinese, Russian, and other storytellers at the center of their regime’s efforts to dominate the information environment are problematic. Rather, as seen repeatedly in our research, the more powerful approach is to challenge the actual controls in two ways: (1) fostering increased nonregime information flows *into* authoritarian information environments and (2) helping people inside the country more freely share nonregime information *within* the country.

In operational terms, focus less on having an American speaker of Russian create social media posts targeting Russian military mothers to get them to decrease support for Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine; instead, help the moms access and share information they can use to organically and natively create their own messages. This creates a two-fold challenge for Putin: challenges to information controls that will demand resources to protect Russian systems, while simultaneously having to pit government censors against a powerful constituency. Rather than an external, US-created narrative versus an internal state narrative, US policy makers should focus on criticizing censorship, advocating for freedom of information access, and using technical or cyber means to undermine information and communication controls.

Authoritarian states have more successfully deployed practices designed to manipulate the open information environments of democratic societies than democratic states have successfully targeted authoritarian reliance on information control. Shifting that balance by the threat or the actual weakening of those controls would

⁴⁹ Guriev and Treisman, *How Modern Dictators Survive*, no. w21136, National Bureau of Economic Research; and Fisher, “Testing the Importance of Information Control to Pyongyang,” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 27, no. 2: 67–111; and Kendall-Taylor et al., “Digital Dictators,” *Foreign Affairs* 99.

clearly generate significant attention in Beijing and Moscow, providing the United States and its allies with powerful new deterrence options. 🌟

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