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# MEDIA VISIONS OF THE GRAY ZONE: CONTRASTING GEOPOLITICAL NARRATIVES IN RUSSIAN AND CHINESE MEDIA

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## Executive Summary:

The purpose of this effort was to contribute to the Strategic Multilayer Analysis by examining media messaging strategies in Russian and Chinese language media, in order to uncover the role of media narratives in the development of potential conflict scenarios, narrative trajectories that might minimize or maximize the potential for conflict, and the role of high impact episodes in evolving media discourse. The study was built upon two prior year-long studies of geopolitical narratives in Chinese and Russian media conducted by the research team, and we used the conclusions of those previous studies to provide a starting point for this project. This project has sought to gain an in-depth look at Chinese and Russian media strategies in the context of gray zone conflict and the role of those narratives and techniques in signaling geopolitical intent. These findings are then used to generate potential strategies for minimizing conflict narratives and strengthening cooperative narratives in areas where there is geopolitical strain.

The research team conducted comprehensive studies of national media to uncover shifting messaging strategies, narratives, and metaphors that imply, precipitate, or minimize conflict. Drawing upon close to 50 different Chinese and Russian sources, the researchers identified thousands of news items that contributed to the final analysis. The researchers monitored general news trends and narratives in Russian and Chinese media, and conducted specific issue data pulls in Chinese and Russian. Specific data pulls focused on the visit of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte to the People's Republic of China, the impact of migration (specifically refugee flows), and coverage of the US Presidential election. The Duterte visit was examined because of the ways in which coverage and analysis of that event revealed narratives of US national decline. The 2016 election was included because of the centrality of that process for global discussion on the value and relevance of US political processes and values in global leadership. In addition, several other data pulls related to ongoing geopolitical events were included because of the insight they provide for reflecting on narratives of collaboration and contradiction.

This analysis presumes a media-centric theory of gray zone conflict, that media narratives have a primary role in creating the political and cultural context in which relations with other nations are created. Media (in both traditional and new media formats) has perhaps the greatest role in shaping and disseminating narratives of conflict, cooperation, and those gray spaces in between, as it provides the geopolitical worldview, as it were, to justify specific policies and stances. Finally, the study utilizes the "narrative paradigm," a framework for understanding the power of narratives in political contexts, for discussing potential ways to undermine narratives of conflict.

Overall, *the findings of this study reveal that both Chinese and Russian media present narratives that feature the decline of the US in economic and political influence, as well as a rapid disintegration of US political values.* Russian media narratives, however, are far more critical of the US and the global order than are Chinese, and are typically more confrontational than are Chinese narratives. In the coverage of Duterte's visit to the PRC, for example, Chinese media was cautious in attempting to capitalize on the Philippine President's well-publicized "break" with the US, without antagonizing the US. Russian media coverage of the same event, however, presented Duterte's visit and comments as vindication of Russian confrontation of the US, and sought to frame the visit as the beginnings of a new "trilateral alliance" between Russia, China, and the Philippines to confront and challenge US hegemony in the Pacific region.

The data around the US presidential election, likewise, sought to demonstrate the failings of US style democracy. Both Russian and Chinese media generally portrayed the election as a farce, and evidence of clear US hypocrisy regarding democratic values. Overall, extensive media coverage undermined US prestige and "soft power" and sought to portray both Russia and China as vindicated in the court of global opinion.

This analysis, however, found significant and important differences between the overall tone of Russian and Chinese geopolitical narratives. Chinese media articulated concerns and complaints about the global order, and that China should rightfully take a greater role in global affairs. However, Chinese media sought to include China into the mainstream of the existing global order, and complain about exclusion from the current system. Russian media, however, sought to delegitimize the current world order, and to replace it with something less beholden to US and European interests. Overall, Russian

media enacted a “gray zone” character much more frequently, in utilizing ambiguity, aggression, and perceived injustice to expand Russian interests against those of the Western world. Conversely, Chinese media sought much more frequently to argue for China’s full inclusion and participation in global affairs, and rarely portrayed the current global system as wholly corrupt and controlled by the US and Europe.

## Section I: Narratives, media, and the creation of The Gray Zone.

Increasingly, political, military, and other types of leadership have begun to re-recognize the role of narratives, particularly geopolitical narratives, in the arena of international relations. The stories that nations tell, and citizens believe, are a tremendous force in shaping issues of national identity, strength, goals, and values. This is not a new phenomenon; political leaders have understood the power of national myths in mobilizing popular support, establishing political legitimacy, and focusing collective effort throughout recorded history. What is new, however, is the increasingly complicated media-scape in which these narratives play out, the interaction between platforms or channels, and the ability of multiple players to shape those narratives from vast distances.

The role of 'information warfare' in gray zone conflict is indisputable, as states seek to influence both external and internal audiences with messages that legitimate belligerent policy. US defense planners regularly incorporate "information" as an element of national power in their planning processes, and the entire spectrum of political actors in most nations now deploy sophisticated strategies to shape narratives in government communications, popular media, and social media.

The Reuter's Institute of News Digital News Report (April, 2016) pointed to social media's emergence as a powerful force in global news among twenty-six Asian and Western nations. It has become the *primary* news source among young people, replacing television, newspapers, and other Web-based platforms. The report argued that the coverage of news on social media is determined by algorithms aiming to create "echo chambers" where people only see news from similar viewpoints with like-minded responses, leading to fragmented, incomplete, and biased understanding of current issues.

The notion that a population can be informed, linked together, and systematically divided by algorithmic applications to create echo chambers, while disturbing in its own right, offers insight into the power and importance of narrative crafting, narrative management, and information exposure in a globalized media context. As the global media-scape has shifted toward a more integrated, digital experience for consumers, the ability of states to craft narratives about self and other to its own citizens are open targets for other nations and/or corporations that seek influence with those same citizens. This is of critical importance, as efforts to present authoritarian-like alternatives to Western democracies have become increasing media savvy in packaging narratives to foreign and domestic populations that present an ideological alternative to democracy.

In essence each citizen becomes both a target and a weapon for information, and disinformation, in a globalized media context, and controlling narrative exposure within that space has become its own type of gray zone conflict. Geopolitical narratives are important, because they help to define the political and geopolitical worldview of a population. Thus, governments seek to develop worldviews that provide support for national and foreign policies, and to define a nation's role in the global order. When a nation seeks to develop an alternative geopolitical worldview through media, and hence to define historical, cultural, and ideological narratives, there is potential for later conflict with nations that have accepted other narratives. We define this effort of developing geopolitical narratives, when they seek to revise, reject, or undermine dominant global narratives, as the "Media Gray Zone."

### Media Gray Zone

The concept of the Media Gray Zone (MGZ), mirrors that of definitions of the more commonly referred to Gray Zone of military operations. The Gray Zone, as it is traditionally understood, occupies a center portion of a spectrum between the white space of peace and the blackness of war; an application of unconventional means to accomplish conventional warlike outcomes. Notably, what is and isn't Gray Zone activity has been extraordinarily difficult to conceptualize, due to the scope of the endeavor and the wide-ranging means that fall under the umbrella of such actions.

Media impacts geopolitical relations in numerous ways, but there are four primary functions that need to be considered for this particular study. First, media is utilized to create narratives that provide a motive and rationale for global engagement, resistance, or other types of action. In other words, media is the primary tool for most citizens to gain an understanding of the geopolitical world. It helps to form a sense of social, cultural and political identity, as well as identify national rivals, friends, or enemies. The

narratives that are presented in mass media, as well as social media, are a primary force in forming a world view. Second, media is used to organize activity, and to control organizations and networks, even for non-military organizations, such as resistance networks or activist groups. Third, media is used to send a message to outsiders, such as rivals or opponents about intentions, threats, and warnings. Finally, media is utilized to generate compliance among local populations to the actions, policies, or plans of governments or insurgent organizations. This project will seek to explore each of these functions within the efforts of Russian and Chinese media strategies.

We argue for the consideration of the “Media Gray Zone” as a separate phenomenon to a more traditional understanding of the Gray Zone for several purposes. First, it allows us to focus solely on narratives as they are presented and likely to be accepted by populations. These narratives explicitly indicate political identities, mythologies, goals, friends, and enemies, and thus, allow us to see clearly how a nation perceives itself vis-à-vis other nations. Because a government is unlikely to consistently enact policies that violate a population’s geopolitical worldview, understanding those narratives allows us to gain some perspective on how a government is likely to act.

Second, media narratives are often far less ambiguous than other types of gray zone indicators, and thus less subject to multiple interpretations. Whereas many indicators of gray zone aggression might be subject to misinterpretation, media narratives are much more typically straightforward, and develop rationales and reasons for a nation’s activities and policies.

The spectrum of operation for the Media Gray Zone ranges from normal global conversations on policy and diplomacy to more aggressive and confrontational narratives of resistance and conflict. When geopolitical narratives straddle the line between two extremes of the spectrum, we consider that activity to be in the Media Gray Zone, where global norms and narratives are contested through strategies of disinformation, fake news, manipulative narratives, and arguments, with the goal as the control of public opinion, in both domestic and foreign audiences.

Mediated gray zone conflict is, in its most simplistic terms, a narrative battle over political and cultural identities, problem and solution labeling, narrative crafting and dissemination to challenge, suppress, and/or support narratives of other actors. Unlike the traditional military Gray Zone model that builds toward full conflict, “outcomes” in the Media Gray Zone are changes in the information environment favorable to the country employing specific narratives into the global media-scape. Victory in the MGZ represents the ability to suppress the narratives from rivals, while gaining currency with one’s own position. The Gray space attempts at reconfiguring or challenging of values, norms, and identities with multiple actors in ideological disagreement. Participants in the global order attempt to redefine norms, values, and identities. Actors attempt to influence the information environment to raise doubts regarding the efficacy of the current system. This is done so by first questioning specific actions as illegitimate, second questioning the credibility of individuals or organizations as acting in bad faith, and finally suggesting a revision to the current order and its component values, institutions, and norms.

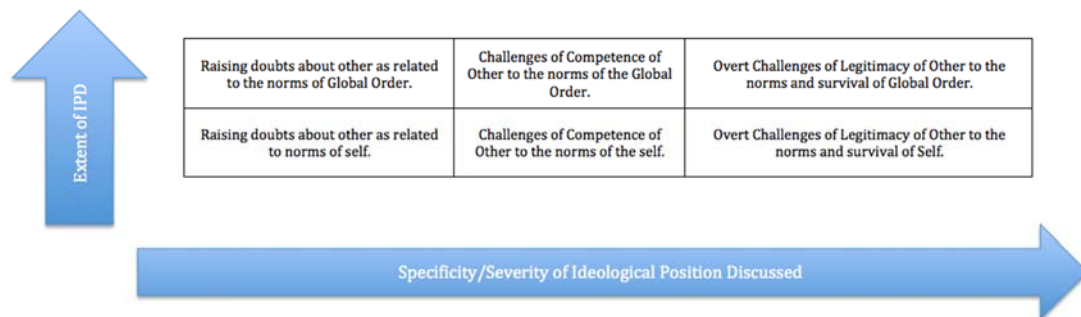
Our understanding of the role of narratives in the media gray zone is similar to Nye’s understanding of “soft power,” which Nye defines as the “power of attraction,” typically based upon the perceived attractiveness of a nation’s culture, policies, and institutions. Whereas the concept of “soft power” is difficult to measure and even more difficult to deploy, geopolitical narratives are far more agile and responsive.

Moreover, in order to assess the likely impact of geopolitical narratives, we propose an evaluation rubric based upon communication scholar Walter Fisher’s conception of the “narrative paradigm.” Fisher argued that political (and geopolitical narratives) are persuasive to audiences based upon two criteria: narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. Narrative coherence is the extent to which a narrative “hangs together,” it makes logical sense, and maintains reasonable consistency over time, at least to the audience in question. Narrative fidelity refers to the extent to which the narrative seems “true” to the audience, or that audiences see their own experiences, values, and assumptions embedded in the narrative. For example, if US policymakers consistently tell a story of US support for democracy, but global audiences clearly see US collusion with anti-democratic leaders, organizations, or policies, the US narrative no longer has fidelity.

Within the Media Gray Zone, Gray space, specific actions and challenges take place upon a gradient of more contentious actions, creating increasing divergence toward the Black space.

Gradient focuses on content of message:

- The X-axis of the Gray space gradient is the specificity/severity of the ideological position of opposing actors discussed on a given issue/topic/event toward the global order and self. These range from the ambiguous/raising of doubts about ideologically opposed other—ex: US losing credibility—to overt challenges—ex: US actions are dangerous the global order.)
- The Y-axis of the Gray space is the extent of the ideological position of opposing actors discussed on a given issue/topic/event toward the global order and self. These range from discussion on the norms of an oppositional other that might be in violation of the norms of self to the discussion of the norms of an oppositional other that is in violation of the common norms of the global order.



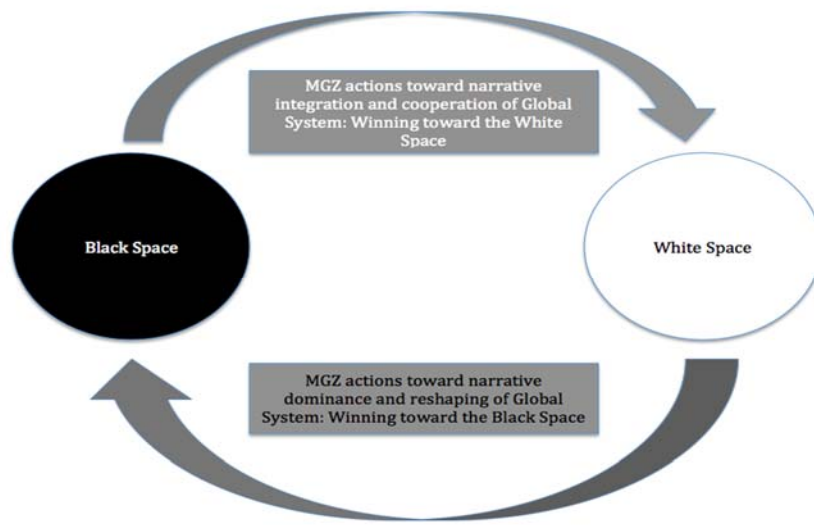
As actors move more toward outright overt challenges of legitimacy, in relation to the survival of the global order, the less cooperative the narratives concerning other become and the more likely MGZ activity is to becoming predictive of both traditional Gray Zone activity and actions of conventional warfare. While the studies here do not offer prediction of conflict as a finding, our goal is to build a working model that incorporates MGZ activity into eventual predictors of such. More importantly, we believe an understanding of the MGZ can help to identify narrative bridges that help nations find common perspectives and points of reference with one another that de-escalate the potential for conflict by binding differing national narratives together.

## Section II. Winning in the Media Gray Zone: The Competition of Global Narratives

The recognition of the MGZ as gradient, interconnected, global media structure means that “winning” within the MGZ space is dichotomous in nature. On one end of that dichotomy is “winning” toward the white space; this type of victory is that of the entire global system and relies on state actors using increasingly cooperative narratives in relation to others within the global system. This culmination of united global narratives represents a more stable, and cooperative system for all, with each actor understanding the role in relation to others and uses narrative bridges to remove a zero-sum perspective for actors in the global system.

The other end of the dichotomy of winning in the MGZ is an individual actor attempting to dominate the media-scape in order to reshape narratives of self in relation to the global system that challenges the narratives of other actors. This type of winning moves increasingly toward the black space of the MGZ and is taken on by individual actors in relation to others.





Achieving either “winning” outcome within the MGZ involves strategies and realms of devoted media tactics that actors in the global system must take on in order to be successful. Our conceptualization of the MGZ sees actors using four primary strategies in order to accomplish MGZ victory. First, presentation of self and others in the global order: identities, credibility, trustworthiness, commonalities, contrasts, and cooperation. Second, penetrating the information environment of other and defense of one’s own information environment: controlling the flow of available information regarding self and other to one’s own citizens and the citizens of other nations. Third, revision of narratives in the media-scape: attempts to question the validity of information, offer alternative information, create uncertainty leading to openings or revisions of order while also serving to prevent dominant narratives and/or create convergence of common standards and goals of self and other. Fourth, insulation and inoculation: grand visions of self as related to legitimacy and place in the global order for one’s own citizens and the citizens of other nations.

Our understanding of narrative impact is heavily influenced by Walter Fisher’s (1991) concept of the “Narrative Paradigm,” which posits that narratives are persuasive to the extent that they both have narrative fidelity and narrative coherence. Narrative coherence means the degree to which narratives are internally consistent, logical, and seem reasonable. Narrative fidelity, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which narratives resonate with an audiences’ perceived experiences and understanding. A geopolitical narrative, for example, will have persuasive power when it both seems internally consistent, and in line with the expectations and experiences of the audience.

Actors pursuing revisionist system narratives can do so in concert with other nations to reset the global order peacefully, and thus move a united system, under a revised global system toward the white space. However, when cooperation of narratives breaks down between individual actors, or with their linked partners, there is acceleration to the black space. Our current global order, while linked economically, has significantly competing narratives concerning foundational approaches to governance and stability. The United States and the West drive forth media narratives concerning the common cores of democracy and the value of progressive social liberalism toward an equitable existence for all of humanity. Increasingly, Russia, Iran, and China drive narratives that outline differing versions of authoritarianism as models for creating stability, security from external threats, and morally sound ways of existence. While these four actors are not directly cooperating with one another, the fact that each in its



own way seeks to undermine or change the existing social order means that there is likely to be a fracturing of the agreed-upon global order.

### **Section III. Methodological approach**

In order to determine how geopolitical narratives are shaping the global media gray zone, the research teams monitored and analyzed Chinese and Russian media outlets. A qualitative analysis of these media sources was conducted using the Multi-Media Monitoring System (M3S) at Texas A&M University. The M3S captures and translates broadcast and web stories into a searchable database. Researchers are able to parse through stories using search terms either in English or the native language of the media source. Texts for analysis are selected using key terms to narrow the data set. Researchers are then able to categorically or thematically examine the data to the specific study's research questions. Because the M3S uses machine generated translation, we have, when possible, checked awkward or unclear translations with native speakers. In the examples that follow in this report, we have left awkward translations intact, as long as the meaning was not in doubt. Where the meaning was in doubt, we provided a better human translation.

The M3S dataset contained news articles from approximately 70 different media outlets (25 Chinese, 25 Russian). At least two coders qualitatively analyzed the data from each language. The researchers conducted data pulls and analysis around both general geopolitical narratives present in each data set, as well as issue and event-specific data pulls related to events or issues that were important indicators of contending geopolitical narratives. The issue-specific data pulls included pulls on Russia's intervention in Syria, global refugee flows, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's visit to China, China's actions in the South China Sea, and the US Presidential election in 2016. Altogether, the various data pulls generated thousands of original news items that were later analyzed.

The analysis that follows reports the general tone of the geopolitical narratives in these media spaces. Space precludes detailed analysis of the extensive data, but the original data is available upon request from the authors.

### **Section IV: Findings:**

Overall, this study reveals significant differences between both the system (global order) level narratives, as well as specific issue narratives. Chinese media tended towards narratives of a basically functioning and intact global order, which would be benefitted by recognition of China's good intentions and renewed economic and cultural power. Russian media tended towards narratives of a "broken" order, one manipulated by the US and other Western nations to their own benefit. In this set of narratives, Russia was an honest broker, seeking to limit the corruption of the global order, and to put a check on Western interests. These narratives were brought down to specific issues as well, with a large amount of consistency between the system and the issue level narratives. Table One below compares the system level narratives, while Table Two compares the issue level narratives.

Table One: Differences in Russian and Chinese language media outputs in global system level narratives

SYSTEM-LEVEL NARRATIVES		
THEME	CHINESE	RUSSIAN
OWN ROLE	Primary actor in region Peer to US Full participant in global development and politics	Return to previous status as “leader” of those opposed to Western hegemony, Defender of Russian speakers Third Rome, Christian Superpower
GLOBAL ORDER	Current order useful US dominance in pacific region should be scaled back, but ok Wary of US intentions to undermine China’s values, institutions, and status	Current order favors US & allies, exploits others Russia should to work with others to undermine confidence
US’S ROLE	US is only real peer to China US/China ties are absolutely vital US is hypocritical and increasingly unpredictable	US is leader of global conspiracy to dominate Russia, China, others US actively trying to undermine/ overthrow Russia, under the guise of democracy and civil rights
ALLIANCES	Stability above all, grounded in mutual respect and sovereignty China’s primary goal is ties with US, then others “multi-polar” but not polarized North Korea: troublesome	Rebuilding global network of influence in Eastern Europe, and elsewhere Utilize global dissatisfaction with the system to cast suspicion on the system and build short term alliances

Russian media portrayals of the gray zone

This analysis extended a previous study the research team conducted a year previously on geopolitical narratives in Russian media (available online or from the authors). This study conducted both general geopolitical narrative analysis as well as specific issue/event analysis. The following is a summary of the overall findings.

*The Global Order and the Collapse of Western Democracy*

Overall, Russian media portrays the existing order as an unfair, undemocratic, and immoral one, led by the US and Western Europe, and dedicated to preserving the privileges of the West. Media narratives typically stress Russia’s role as a counter to US and Western European hegemony, as well as Russia’s role as a global power, which treats other nations with respect and dignity absent from their

relationship with the West. Russian media narratives stress the importance of countering Western hegemony at every turn, and typically portray Russia as seeking to save the rest of the world from Western immorality and hypocrisy. For example, Russian media portrayed the U.S. election process as a demonstration of the collapse of Western democracy. This is by far the most powerful and most present occurring topic discussed throughout the entire dataset, and it is the culmination of various narratives in the MGZ by Russia to show that the global order needs to change and is already in the process of the change toward new global leadership, led by Russia.

Russian media presented the U.S. election as a highlight to the over-extension of globalism, that Western democracies are elite run systems that have lost touch with their own citizens and on the verge of collapse. The corruption and lack of qualifications of leadership of the candidates was covered at great length. Hillary Clinton, in particular, was presented as scandal-ridden, and in collusion with the media to undermine Bernie Sanders. Clinton was portrayed as willing to do and say anything in order to win the election. Donald Trump was occasionally portrayed as a comical buffoon, as corrupt and/or incompetent in his dealings with Trump University and his tax releases. He is seen as unpredictable and yet the best hope for the preservation of the U.S. system as somewhat viable going forward. The U.S. political system is presented as a corrupt farce with candidates trading insults, never discussing issues at any length or with any real meaning, and as no longer capable of actually representing its people. While the U.S. political process is in a tailspin, its citizens are simply watching it as though it were theater, while undercurrents of race violence and mob violence increasingly divide the country's political parties and its people.

Russian media presents Russia as a nation willing to watch the U.S. system, and all of Western democracy, collapse on itself. While U.S. system failure might result in global conflict, financial market collapses, or further disruptions to global stability in vulnerable parts of the world, the Western model is shown as something that has overreached so far that it is unlikely to be able to save itself. Russia is thus shown as a sane alternative to Western democracy. Putin is mentioned as more electable in the United States than any of the running candidates, and shown as being admired by Donald Trump.

#### *Manipulation of the U.S. election:*

Given the widespread attention in the US to Russian activities during the US presidential campaign, it is only natural to wonder how Russian media covered the same accusations. Russian media presented accusations of their intervention in the U.S. election prominently across the data set. The media succeeded in creating narratives that established Russia as innocent of any involvement in the U.S. election, as being dragged unwillingly into U.S. politics by Hillary Clinton and her team, and as still willing to cooperate with the United States regardless of the outcome of the U.S. election; and despite the "Red Scare" occurring in the U.S. Donald Trump was shown repeatedly as a supporter of Russian positions and used to bolster claims of Russian innocence in any wrong-doing.

Russian media presented the U.S. as intentionally attempting to show links between Trump and Russia in order to alter the election in favor of Hillary Clinton. The U.S. media is presented as in collusion with the Democratic Party in order to cover up and shift blame from Clinton's email scandals as released by Wikileaks by making false allegations concerning Russia. Hillary Clinton is shown as corrupt, and attempting to create dangerous conspiracy theories to obfuscate her own guilt. Russian media quotes cyber-experts and U.S. intelligence reports related to her email scandal to show their innocence.

While there are repeated challenges to the competency of Clinton as related to Russia, Trump is covered in a light of cautious optimism toward finding common ground and re-establishing a more trusting relationship between the U.S. and Russia. Trump's ultimate victory in the election made coverage of the issue of accusations against Russia in the election shift to a more cooperative tone.

#### *Imposed U.S. led Sanctions against Russia:*

Russian media presented the U.S. led sanctions against Russia as another prominent media gray zone item. These narratives portrayed Russia as being able to determine its own destiny and borders, and as the victim of globalist bullies wanting to suppress Russia. Statements by Donald Trump claiming the

people of Crimea wanted to be Russian were used in support of Russia's positions toward territorial expansion. Vladimir Putin's praise of Donald Trump is shown repeatedly in efforts to demonstrate similarities between leadership styles; Trump in some ways is discussed as a reflection of Putin.

The specter of possible war over globalist policies specifically targeting Russia in order to destabilize the regime is an alarming challenge to the global order, and shows at least one party in the United States political system as literally willing to risk war in order to prevent nations such as Russia from deciding their own territorial boundaries and knowing how best to deal with their neighboring nations. Russian media constantly refers to NATO as an external threat used by globalists to prevent Russia from being an autonomous nation. Trump's victory is the only factor that lightens the tone of these discussions, and that is with a resignation that very little would be worse for Russia than a Clinton victory.

### *The Syrian Civil War*

Russian media presented the Syrian civil war as a micro-representative of the differing macro-foreign policy agendas between the West (particularly the United States) and itself. The media tended to portray Russia as a reasonable peace-broker concerned with stabilizing the Middle East and defeating terrorism. Russian military capabilities were highlighted, as were examples of those capabilities being used to soundly defeat terrorists on the ground. Russian media also presented both Putin, and Russia as a whole, as respected by Middle Eastern leaders for their sensible approaches toward ending regional chaos.

The presentation of the Syrian war shows the U.S. as having ill thought through foreign policies, for reasons more concerned with self than with the actual region, and such policies must change in order to accomplish peace. The United States is presented as an actor that must begin working with other nations to accomplish the goals related to global stability, instead of pursuing its own selfish concerns. There is hope for future cooperation and genuine concern for a potential election of Hillary Clinton, who is presented as a potential escalator of conflict.

The results of these findings across the dataset show Russia as overtly challenging the legitimacy of a U.S. led global order, and as seeking to redefine, through narratives, its position in the global order. Russia is shown as a respected, sensible, and cooperative nation that is tired of being bullied by an elitist U.S. system that is willing to spread globalism by the sword in order to accomplish its own objectives...even when those objectives mean undermining U.S. citizens. It is a call for a change of the global order guard, and Russia is actively shown as a nation ready to work with others who would also like to see a change to the system...further, Russian media claim the change is happening without any direct action by itself or others. The U.S. system and all of Western democracy are collapsing under the weight of their own greed and over expansion; Russia is simply positioning itself to fill the void. Ultimately, it is a concerted information campaign to win toward the black space of the MGZ.

### Chinese media portrayals of the gray zone

#### *The Global Order and China's role:*

In contrast to Russian media, Chinese media was much less critical of the overall global order. Rather than arguing that the current global order is corruptly ruled by Western powers for their own benefit, Chinese media found limited faults with the current system of global norms and rules. Rather than alleging that the system was "rigged" in favor of the West, Chinese media tended towards an argument that the existing order needed to be modified in order to accommodate China's rising geopolitical and economic clout. Existing rules and norms regarding global law, economics, and statecraft were found to be missing sensitivity to China's interests, but not deliberately skewed to disadvantage all other nations. Most major system-level narratives adopted some form of this argument, while in reference to specific issues, China's arguments about its own interests were more pronounced. Following are a few specific examples of the coverage.

#### *Rodrigo Duterte's visit to the People's Republic of China*

In October of 2016, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte made an official visit to Beijing to boost trade and diplomatic ties. During the visit, Duterte signaled his intention to deliberately weaken ties with the US, even using the word “separation” between the two nations, and to strengthen ties with the PRC. Duterte’s visit came just a few months after an international tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines in their dispute with the PRC over China’s engagement in the South China Sea. Duterte’s comments about “separating” from the US were important, but Chinese media was cautious about reading too much into the words. Although the remarks were reported, they were not exploited for obvious political advantage in our data sources. In contrast, Russian media widely reported the events and Duterte’s comments, and was far more assertive in arguing that Duterte’s break from the US was a signal event in shifting the global order away from the US and Western Europe.

Table Two: Differences in Russian and Chinese language media outputs at issue-level narratives

ISSUE-LEVEL NARRATIVES		
ISSUE	CHINESE	RUSSIAN
<b>DUETERTE’S DIVOCE</b>	China appreciative of improving ties with Philippines, strong potential moving forward Little coverage of Duterte’s divorce statement, but acknowledgement of his dissatisfaction	Duterte’s visit as vindication of Russia Argues that new triumvirate of Russia, China, and Philippines will counter US hegemony
<b>US ELECTIONS</b>	US Election is unpredictable, Clinton is predictable Trump is reckless Worry about impact on US/ Chinese relations Stability is key value	Russia had no role in US election Both candidates represent the rich Clinton is untrustworthy; Trump better understands Russia, but unpredictable US media played up weak Trump ties with to help Clinton US election is rigged; US style democracy is a sham
<b>US SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA</b>	No real coverage	Russia’s engagement in Syria was to protect the Christians and others against terrorists US-led sanctions are “bullying” to protect privilege US is trying to provoke war with Russia

*South China Sea narratives*

Perhaps the most sensitive issue in Chinese geopolitical narratives at this time is China’s claim for sovereignty over the South China Sea, claims rejected by many of China’s neighbors, as well as the US and other Western powers. This issue is extensively covered in Chinese media, and rarely, if ever, is

the dominant Chinese narrative countered. That narrative consists of a number of familiar refrains, namely, that China has historically had dominance over the region, that it is a responsible global stakeholder, and that US (and others) claims otherwise are attempts to constrain Chinese regional influence. The claims of nations such as Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, or others that assert control over some part of the region are seen as manipulations by the US government, which has a primary goal of keeping China from achieving regional dominance, or indeed, even parity with the US in the region. Likewise, US claims that its concern is to “protect global trade” are seen as disingenuous, given China’s obvious role in global trade, manufacturing and transportation. These are seen as “made up” reasons to undermine Chinese regional influence, rather than legitimate claims for the concern of global trade.

However, even in this most sensitive of issues, Chinese media is careful not to stretch its claims too far. It claims legitimate sovereignty over the South China Sea region, but does not seek to undermine the existing global order, which it has only recently been successful in joining.

### *The US Presidential Election in Chinese and Russian media*

From alleged Russian hacking of Hillary Clinton’s emails, to visual memes of Donald Trump kissing Russian President Putin, the U.S. presidential elections are affected by not just domestic political concerns but international ones as well. Obviously, the President of the US is the most visible symbol of the United States to much of the world, and the policies that the President brings to the office have global ramifications. For these reasons and more, the US presidential election becomes one of the most visible examples of global attention to the US and its political system, and global discussion of the merits of “democracy” often are framed in reference to what is modeled in the US. Unfortunately, the information that US voters receive about global perceptions is typically anecdotal and incomplete.

The data drawn for this study showed keen interest in the processes and outcomes of the election, as well as vindication in the problems inherent in US political processes. Because of the United States’ predominant role in geopolitics and global economics, foreign governments and their citizens scrutinize the candidates and their positions, which can hint at future American policies. Chinese media – which include official, government-controlled outlets and the relatively privatized media sector – generally take two approaches when commenting on American politics. First, they often point to the arrogance of American politicians, especially those who stress the superiority of the U.S. democratic system over those of other nations. Next, they usually hesitate to make outright editorial arguments. Instead, they quote international figures and analysts to advance a particular point of view. During the campaign, Chinese media paid much attention to global criticism of Trump as potentially “the most reckless president” (as QQ News, a news aggregator, recently wrote). But Clinton is heavily criticized as well. For example, the Xinhua news agency put out an article that drew heavily from the Wikileaks DNC documents and argued that Clinton’s campaign is ahead because of close cooperation with U.S. media – a claim also made by Trump’s campaign.

Chinese media have consistently focused on both candidates’ weaknesses, like Clinton’s email controversy and Trump’s sexual harassment issues. But they paid particularly close attention to the two candidates’ positions on trade.

Trump, they warn, would be likely to start a trade war with China, which would cost the United States five million jobs. The Global Times, a more nationalistic outlet, ran an expanded version of an article about Trump’s business dealings originally written by the international news outlet [Agence France-Presse](#). The Chinese version insinuated that should Trump win the election, he would undoubtedly drop some of his more hostile language. The same paper also ran an editorial noting that although most Chinese preferred Clinton, some did prefer Trump because of Clinton’s “viciousness” toward China, primarily over the issue of human rights. Overall, however, the tone of Chinese coverage has stressed the unpredictability and “recklessness” of Trump and cited the view of international political analysts to express cautious optimism that Clinton will win. Despite the optimism, China’s main news agency *Xinhua* concluded that the U.S. election is playing



out “like [a] soap opera” and “causing widespread concern.” Xinhua further argued that “no matter who wins the general election,” the people of the United States “will have lost.”

#### Russia: Trump, Trump, Trump

Russia, of course, played a unique role in the current election. Many U.S. policymakers believe that Russia was behind the hack of DNC emails, and a prominent Russian politician recently declared that Clinton’s election could lead to nuclear war between the two nations. While that claim is probably over the top, there’s no question that Russian media had a pro-Trump bias. Although many Americans fear that this is because Trump is willfully naive on Russian expansionism, Russian news outlets express deep dissatisfaction with Clinton. The business paper *Kommersant* sent a reporter to a Trump rally, where the correspondent was told by a Trump supporter, “We have a divided country, you [Russia] don’t. You have a strong leader and man of action, we need the same.”

Russian media often praised Trump for his business acumen. Clinton, they say, has it out for the Russians, with claims that the country “purposefully bombs [and] wants to destroy many of the residents of Syria” (as the broadsheet *Izvestia* put it). Meanwhile, the daily *Gazeta* concluded that discussion of Russia is nothing but a wedge issue for Trump and Clinton, with Clinton “using the anti-Russian card more often.” The preference for Trump doesn’t mean that he escaped criticism, however. The popular Moscow daily *Komsomolets* summed up the second debate with the following: “Never before have the American people seen such debates, when one candidate (Trump) threatened to put the opponent in jail.” *Kommersant* criticized the debates for the way the candidates have spent most of the “time talking about the negative qualities of their [opponents’] failures and not presenting their vision for the development of the economy.”

The election coverage in both nations reflected poorly on American democratic values, with much of the world finding little to emulate in the process. As China’s official *Xinhua* news agency noted, the “presidential election has become like a farce,” with the “election chaos” a cause for global concern.

#### Summary and Conclusions:

This research demonstrates there are marked differences in “gray zone” conceptualizations in Russian and Chinese media. Table one portrays some of the key differences between Russian and Chinese media at both the global (system) level and in specific issues. Overall, Russian media is typically much more assertive, aggressive, and critical of the US and Western Europe. In Russian media, the dominant geopolitical narratives portray the corrupt West as attempting to keep other nations from achieving any significant economic or political boost, so that Western interests and power blocs remain dominant. Russian media craft narratives that move toward the defined black space of the MGZ, demonstrating that a reordering of the global order is both underway and that such reordering will be of benefit to the Russian state. Russian media does not present the state as actively attempting to be the catalyst for such a reordering (as an actor like ISIS would do through their propaganda outlets), rather the Russian state is seen as a sort of sane, external observer watching as the Western order collapses on itself and happy to play a major role in the reshuffling of global power.

These narratives are extremely telling and worrying as it shows relations between the West and Russia are becoming irremediable. Presenting no view for itself within the existing order (or in MGZ terms, moving toward a cooperative white space), Russian media presents an alternative of system overhaul that Western leaders should understand and take action to resolve. Whether these narratives toward the black space exist in part to inoculate the regime from social unrest is of lesser concern than the larger effects of having an entire population seeing the West as both morally bankrupt and a barrier to their own well-being and success. Future research should seek to find narrative bridges between the U.S. and Russia, understand the sentiments of the Russian population when confronted with anti-Western/ant—global order narratives, and discuss areas of cooperative success that can allow Russians to see success in moving toward the white space of the MGZ.



Chinese media, on the other hand, while criticizing specific policies, tends to not cast aspersion on the global system. In other words, Chinese media portrays a geopolitical world and an economic world that largely works to the benefit of all, although it needs to be tweaked to accommodate the reality of an emerging and powerful China. In specific issues, such as the South China Sea, Chinese media is typically more forceful, but that is typically in a small number of specific issues.

The implications of this research for US soft power are important. These geopolitical narratives shape the expectations, beliefs, and subsequent policies for the majority of the populations of these two nations, and create legitimating rationales for their own policies, many of which actively undercut US interests and policies. This research clearly distinguishes that there is a gradient in what we have called the “media gray zone,” which is the arena for competing narratives, to a global audience.

In assessing the likely impact of these narratives, we turn again to Fisher’s criterion in the narrative paradigm; whether or not the narratives have coherence and fidelity. Evaluating these broad sets of narratives provides some understanding of their likely impact. Whereas China’s geopolitical narratives of an intact and basically functioning global order seem to have fidelity to much of the world where economic progress is still happening (including the US), Russia’s claims of a rigged social order only benefitting the West will have more fidelity in areas of the globe where economic decline is a factor, and it is difficult to find jobs. Likewise, Russia’s claims of its interest in a stable global order are incoherent with its recent actions in the Ukraine, Syria, and other regions. China’s policy of building out military outposts in the South China Sea, however, are coherent within its claim of historical and legal sovereignty over the region.

This analysis demonstrates the utility of a narrative approach to the gray zone, one in which narratives legitimate and justify specific policies and actions regarding geopolitical action. Narratives in which there are few options open to actors except aggression are on the rise in Russia, while the narratives in China still contain fluidity and an openness to compromise.

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