



China's propaganda campaign in Sweden, 2018–2019

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Main points

- Since early 2018, China's government and its embassy in Stockholm have been conducting an intense campaign of public criticism of Swedish media outlets, journalists, scholars, human rights activists, political parties and authorities. This criticism has sometimes contained implicit threats and personal accusations, and has occasionally been followed up by travel warnings to Chinese citizens.
- The campaign may be part of a government-directed strategy to pressure Swedish authorities and public opinion to be more accommodating towards Beijing's concerns, and in particular to reduce their public criticism of the handling of the case of Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen being held in China since 2015. The goal could also be to demonstrate the costs of publicly opposing China to other European nations.
- A number of factors suggest that China's Ambassador to Sweden, Gui Congyou, has been an important driving force behind the campaign. The propaganda push has allowed him to put his embassy in the spotlight and portray it as a front runner in Xi Jinping's mission to increase China's influence over global media.
- The campaign does not seem to have achieved its aims. Rather than shaping Swedish public discourse and policy in China's favour, it has sparked an extensive negative reaction. At the same time, however, it may have contributed to self-censorship in Swedish society and in European governments.



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The Chinese government has embarked on an unprecedented campaign to shape Sweden's public debate of China. Since early 2018, its embassy in Stockholm has released a steady stream of statements denouncing media coverage of China as "one-sided", "untruthful" and "totally groundless". The criticism has targeted reporting and commentaries on various China-related issues, ranging from the fate of Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen being held in China, to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The embassy has also questioned Sweden's commitment to human rights, accused the authorities of violating the basic rights of Chinese citizens visiting Sweden, and issued warnings on the dangers of travelling to the country. Individual journalists, activists and scholars, as well as political parties, have been singled out for criticism. Many statements have been followed up with letters to media outlets, requesting that they publish the ambassador's responses to news features and opinion pieces. These requests have occasionally been granted.¹

This confrontational approach stands out compared to China's current method of

dealing with other European countries. Our mapping shows that between January 2018 and May 2019, the embassy made at least 57 written critical statements, which included speeches, interviews and op-eds by the ambassador. At the time of writing, the campaign shows no sign of abating.

A central message is that Sweden is plagued by a so-called media tyranny. In the words of the embassy, "some Swedish media, when it comes to coverage on China, only allow themselves the right to do one-sided, biased and untruthful reporting on China, but deny China the right to speak about the reality and its positions. This is not only unfair distorted facts and against media ethics and professionalism, but also media tyranny".²

The critical statements began early in 2018, not long after a new Chinese ambassador, Gui Congyou, took up his position. As the public face of the campaign, he has met with media executives and politicians, given numerous interviews to the print media, radio and television, and written opinion pieces in some of Sweden's largest newspapers.

Sweden-China relations

In 1950, Sweden became the first non-communist European country to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. In recent years, China's importance as a trading partner and provider of investments to Sweden has grown substantially. Sweden has typically sought to keep a low profile regarding contested political questions. Compared to other EU countries, however, Sweden emerges as one of the most active member states when it comes to promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law in relations with China.

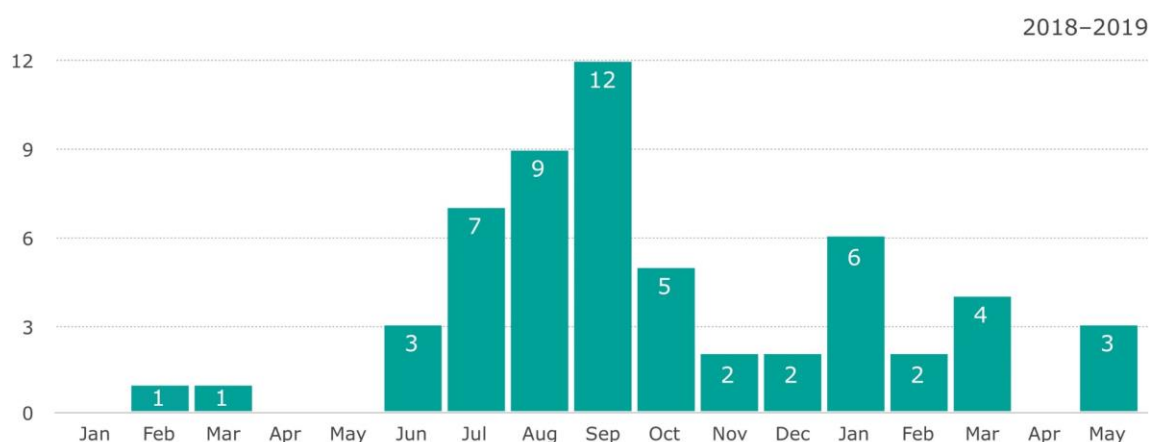
¹ On 6 August, the authors published an opinion piece in *Svenska Dagbladet* on the BRI. The ambassador published a response in the same newspaper on 20 August, stating that our article contained "distorted information" and that it

was "highly misleading and harmful to the future Swedish-Chinese cooperation within BRI".

² Chinese Embassy statement 22.06.18.



Figure 1. Critical statements from the Chinese Embassy



After a slow start, statements started to pile up on the embassy's website in the summer and autumn of 2018. Many focused on defending the human rights record of the Chinese government and its treatment of Gui Minhai. In September, the campaign escalated after a peculiar incident involving Chinese tourists. A family of three adults had attempted to check in at a hostel in Stockholm earlier that month. After a disagreement with hostel staff, the police were called and removed them from the premises. In a video circulated online, one of the tourists can be seen laying on the ground screaming for help.³ The tourists reported the incident to the authorities, but the prosecutor found that the police had followed standard procedure.⁴

Two weeks after the incident, the embassy released a sharply worded statement accusing the Swedish police of "brutal abuse" of the tourists.⁵ It described how the

police had "severely endangered the life and violated the basic human rights of the Chinese citizens" and that China had "urged the Swedish government to conduct thorough and immediate investigation, and respond to the Chinese citizens' requests for punishment, apology and compensation". At a regular press conference in Beijing, China's foreign ministry spokesperson repeated claims that the tourists had been "brutally treated".⁶ Chinese state media also denounced the behaviour of the Swedish police.⁷

Shortly afterwards, the ambassador gave an interview to one of Sweden's biggest media outlets, explaining that China found it "shocking and hard to understand that the three Chinese tourists were treated in such a brutal manner in a country that always talks about human rights and justice". He also claimed that: "In China, you will never experience the kind of brutal treatment by

³ Guardian News, "Chinese tourists complain after being removed from hostel in Sweden", YouTube, 17.09.18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pPGM62Rb18>.

⁴ SVT, "Ingen utredning mot polisen som avisade kinesiska turister", 17.09.18, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/stockholm/avisad-kinesisk-familj>.

⁵ Chinese Embassy statement 15.09.18.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (Chinese MFA), "Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang's regular press conference on September 17", 17.09.18, <http://sl.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1595908.htm>.

⁷ China Daily, "Swedish police action appalling", 17.09.18, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201809/17/WS5b9ee1caa31033b4f46564e9.html>.



the police that the three Chinese tourists had to suffer".⁸

In a later interview, Gui elaborated further: "The three tourists, including two elders, one of whom was ill and on medication, were cast at a graveyard in a desolate place after being forcefully removed from the hotel by the police. It was late at night and below 10°C, and their safety was threatened and dignity harmed ... Is the Swedish Police Law so inhumane and immoral? Does the Swedish law disrespect basic human rights to such an extent?!" The ambassador also expressed his discontent with the Swedish government: "Given that the police are there to enforce the law on behalf of the government, does the Swedish government not respect human rights and dignity either?" Moreover, Swedish media mentioned the possibility that the incident may have been fabricated.⁹ The ambassador firmly rejected this by emphasising that "We all live in reality, not in fictional detective stories!"¹⁰

On 14 September the embassy issued a travel alert stating that Chinese tourists had recently fallen victim to "brutal treatment" by the Swedish authorities.¹¹ China's foreign ministry also published a separate travel alert on 23 September, which has since been extended a number of times.¹² This alert does not mention the tourist incident but instead refers to a rising number of robberies and thefts being reported by Chinese tourists.¹³

The propaganda campaign further intensified when a Swedish public service television broadcaster, SVT, ran a satirical programme on the incident. It included a racially charged sketch that was criticized internationally and in Sweden. The embassy responded by accusing SVT of seeking to "instigate racial hatred and confrontation" and noted that the programme "breaks the basic moral principles of mankind".¹⁴ The statement asked for an immediate apology from SVT. Both the embassy and the Chinese foreign ministry, which again

The Gui Minhai case

Gui Minhai is a Swedish citizen who has been held in China since he disappeared from his holiday home in Thailand in 2015. Gui, who used to be associated with a Hong Kong bookstore that sold books about China's top political leaders, has been paraded on state television in what looks like forced confessions. In early 2019, it emerged that the Swedish ambassador to China, Anna Lindstedt, had secretly met with Gui Minhai's daughter, Angela Gui, together with two businessmen with connections in China. Angela Gui, who revealed the meeting to the public, described how the businessmen had asked her to stop making public calls for her father's release if she wanted him to be freed. The Swedish foreign ministry claims that it did not approve the meeting. Lindstedt is currently under investigation by the Security Service. While some observers have speculated that the meeting was part of an influence operation orchestrated by the Chinese government, there is no publicly available evidence to confirm this claim.

⁸ Chinese Embassy statement 17.09.18.

⁹ Mats Larsson, "Kinas ilska handlar mest om Gui Minhai", *Expressen*, 16.09.18, <https://www.expressen.se/kronikor/mats-larsson/kina-slar-tillbaka-for-kritiken-om-gui-minhai/>.

¹⁰ Chinese Embassy statement 18.09.18.

¹¹ Chinese Embassy statement 14.09.18.

¹² Chinese Embassy statement 22.03.19.

¹³ Chinese MFA, "提醒在瑞典中国公民注意安全", 23.09.18,

<http://cs.mfa.gov.cn/rdgz/t1597975.shtml>.

¹⁴ Chinese Embassy statement 22.09.18.



Motives behind the campaign

How do we explain the embassy's propaganda campaign in Sweden? One possibility is that it is a government-directed strategy to pressure Swedish public opinion and the government to be more accommodating towards Beijing's concerns. In comparison to many of its European neighbours, Sweden has been quite vocal and critical about China's human rights record.²² In February 2018, the Chinese state-run tabloid *Global Times* wrote that Sweden appeared to be "craving the limelight" and wanted to "demonstrate its diplomatic heroism" to the EU and the West by trying to get Gui Minhai released.²³

In this context, the propaganda push could be an attempt to not only silence Swedish criticism but also set an example to other European countries by demonstrating the costs of publicly opposing Beijing. China could also be using Sweden as a testing ground for new methods to gain influence in Europe.²⁴

In concrete terms, China's reaction to the tourist incident looks like an attempt to shift attention away from its own human rights record.²⁵ Since Gui Minhai's disappearance from his holiday home in Thailand in 2015, China has had to defend its actions to an increasingly well-informed and vocal

Swedish audience. As the embassy's attempts to discredit Gui mostly appear to have emboldened critics, the Chinese government may have seen the fate of the tourists as an opportunity to turn the tables by putting the spotlight on Sweden's supposed shortcomings. Again, by reacting forcefully to a seemingly minor incident – a tactic one observer has called "broken porcelain" diplomacy – China may be attempting to discourage public opposition from other European states eager to maintain good relations with Beijing.²⁶

The ambassador has deflected questions on whether China's reaction to the tourist incident was connected to Gui Minhai.²⁷ However, one thing that might suggest that this is indeed the case is that the embassy has responded to criticism over Gui's case by raising Sweden's perceived mistreatment of the Chinese tourists.²⁸ It would not be the first time that Beijing has tried to divert attention away from its human rights record by highlighting alleged flaws in others. In response to the US State Department's annual country report on human rights, for instance, China publishes its own report on human rights in the United States.

While the campaign may be a top-down strategy emanating from Beijing, a number of factors speak in favour of a different

²² Tim Rühlig, Björn Jerdén, Frans-Paul van der Putten, John Seaman, Miguel Otero-Iglesias and Alice Ekman, "The role of political values in Europe-China relations" in *Political Values in Europe-China Relations*, European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), 2018, p. 13.

²³ *Global Times*, "Is Sweden making 'Saving Gui Minhai' movie?", 19.02.18, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1089075.shtml>.

²⁴ Claes Petersson, "Forskare: Sverige är måltavla för kinesiskt experiment", *Expressen*, 20.09.18, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/forskare-sverige-ar-maltavla-for-kinesiskt-experiment/>.

²⁵ Björn Jerdén and Viking Bohman, "What Chinese tourist row in Sweden says about the future of Europe-China relations", *South China Morning Post*, 21.09.18,

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/united-states/article/2164981/what-chinese-tourist-row-sweden-says-about>.

²⁶ David Bandurski, "China's new diplomacy in Europe has a name: broken porcelain", *The Guardian*, 17.10.18,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/17/china-new-diplomacy-broken-porcelain-sweden>.

²⁷ Chinese Embassy statement 17.09.18.

²⁸ Chinese Embassy statement 31.01.19.



explanation. The campaign has sparked almost exclusively negative reactions from the Swedish side (see below). If the goal was to experiment with ways to reduce public criticism of China, one would expect Beijing to either adapt or discontinue the campaign when it provoked a widespread backlash.

If the goal was to intimidate *other* European governments, the outburst following the tourist incident may have served to demonstrate China's resolve. Apart from this incident, however, the embassy's activities have largely consisted of accusations against Swedish journalists and media outlets, which seems like an odd method to send a signal to governments around Europe. From a strategic perspective, it is hard to understand why China would be willing to damage its reputation in Sweden – a fairly influential EU member state – when it is under pressure from the ongoing trade war with the United States. In addition, if the aim was to instil caution in others, it would seem logical for Beijing to impose economic pressure beyond the travel alert, which appears to have had only a limited impact on the flow of Chinese tourists going to Sweden.²⁹ Instead, Chinese investment in Sweden surged in 2018 (a threefold increase compared to the previous year) and the bilateral trade volume continued to grow.³⁰

In our view, a more plausible explanation is that the Chinese ambassador has spearheaded the campaign. The propaganda push began not long after he took up his post and he has positioned

himself at the forefront of the activities. Moreover, he seems to be personally committed to spreading China's voice in the world, as can be seen in his strongly worded statements on issues unrelated to Sweden, such as the trade friction between China and the United States.³¹ According to ambassador Gui, his "mission" is to present a "true, objective and complete" image of China.³² He has explained that "[w]hen we make clarification on the Embassy's website ... we have only one goal – objectivity".³³ He sees the Chinese side as being "obligated" to point out the "bias" and "mistakes" of media and journalists that are "hostile to China".³⁴

The embassy has stated that "we fully respect freedom of press, but any press publication must be based on facts".³⁵ In a conversation with one of the authors, the ambassador clarified that although he respects Sweden's commitment to protecting freedom of expression, this freedom must be exercised within the bounds of a legal framework. In practice, these views seem to imply that some of the Swedish media coverage of China not only does not qualify as "facts", but should also be considered illegal.

If the ambassador is indeed a main driving force behind the campaign, his actions may be motivated by a desire to impress superiors in Beijing. By vocally propagating China's narratives abroad, he has put his embassy in the spotlight and positioned it as a front runner in Xi Jinping's mission to increase China's global influence over media and "tell China's story well".³⁶ Such

²⁹ *Svenska Dagbladet*/TT, "Färre kinesiska turister till Sverige", 05.02.19, <https://www.svd.se/farre-kinesiska-turister-till-sverige>.

³⁰ Forthcoming publication by the authors.

³¹ Chinese Embassy statement 24.05.19.

³² See e.g. Chinese Embassy statement 10.07.18.

³³ Chinese Embassy statement 21.09.18.

³⁴ Chinese Embassy statement 19.07.18.

³⁵ Chinese Embassy statement 03.05.19.

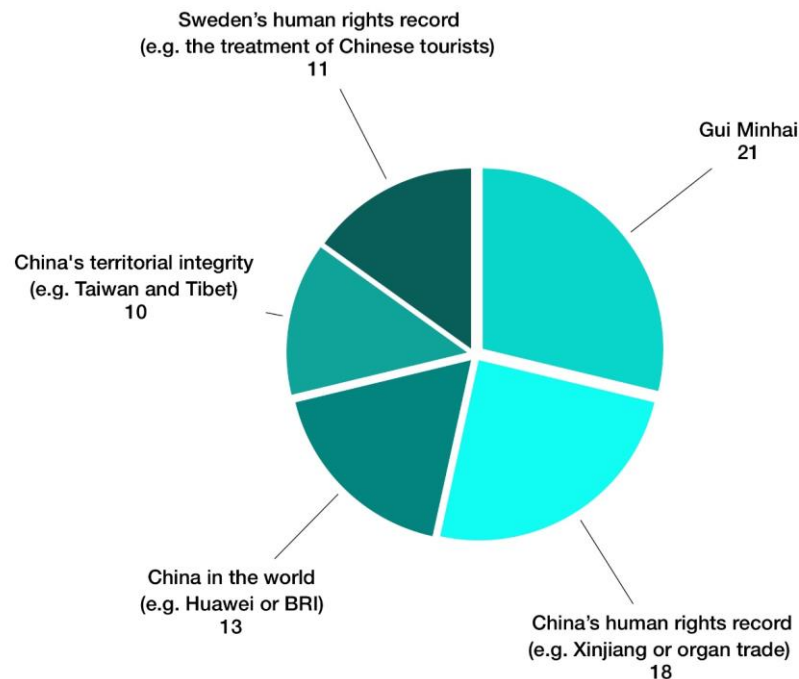
³⁶ Reuters, "China's Xi urges state media to boost global influence", 19.02.16, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-media/chinas-xi-urges-state-media-to-boost-global-influence-idUSKCN0VS11F>.



ambitions could also help to explain why the embassy has continued the campaign despite negative feedback. It would not be the first time that China has adopted an uncompromising approach to international pushback. For example, it has been described how Chinese diplomats have dealt with protests over human rights abuses in Xinjiang by “apply[ing] domestic propaganda to the international community” and “hoping that the issue would go away if they made their point often, loudly and forcefully enough”.³⁷

Another factor that may have contributed to the embassy’s perseverance is the ambassador’s limited professional experience with liberal democratic societies.³⁸ (Prior to his current posting, many of Gui’s positions in the foreign ministry concerned Russia.) It cannot be ruled out that the embassy has not fully grasped the ongoing dynamics in Swedish society, and that by extension decision-makers in Beijing are not fully aware of the current backlash.

Figure 3. Frequency of specific topics raised in critical Embassy statements between January 2018 and May 2019³⁹



³⁷ Reuters, “China presses tough message to diplomats on Xinjiang’s ‘murderous devils’”, 01.03.19, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang/china-presses-tough-message-to-diplomats-on-xinjiangs-murderous-devils-idUSKCN1QH334>.

³⁸ Jichang Lulu, “Confined discourse management and the PRC’s localised interactions in the Nordics”, 22.10.18, Sinopsis,

<https://sinopsis.cz/en/confined-discourse-management-and-the-prcs-localised-interactions-in-the-nordics/>.

³⁹ Because several statements covered more than one topic, the total number of occasions that topics were raised exceeds the number of statements. Two statements did not treat a specific topic and were not included in the count.



Swedish reactions

In comparison to other countries, Sweden does not present fertile ground for Chinese narratives on human rights. According to the 2018 Global Attitudes Survey by the Pew Research Center, the Swedish population is among the most critical when it comes to judging whether the Chinese government respects personal freedoms.⁴⁰ Prominent academics have long been sceptical of the Communist Party and few respected public figures have been willing to defend it.

In this context, it is not surprising that the embassy's confrontational approach has prompted a backlash from Sweden's mass media.⁴¹ Between January 2018 and February 2019, there were at least 52 Swedish media reactions to the propaganda campaign, most of which presented China's actions in negative or highly negative lighting. There were frequent criticisms of the Communist Party's authoritarian rule and portrayals of the embassy's actions as a strange but worrying attempt to bully Sweden into submission.⁴² While the

embassy has sought to downplay the importance of critics by describing them as "certain forces" or "a small number of people", these reactions from mainstream media of different ideological leanings suggests that large parts of Swedish agree with the criticisms.⁴³

Attempts to silence Swedish protests over Gui Minhai have failed to the extent that media criticism continues and appears to have intensified. According to the Swedish foreign minister, the work to free Gui continues "at full force".⁴⁴ The EU has also continued to raise the case publicly.⁴⁵ In addition, the Swedish foreign ministry has stated that it has explained to the Chinese embassy on multiple occasions that it expects it to respect freedom of expression in Sweden.⁴⁶

Negative reactions to the propaganda campaign have fed into the wider Swedish debate about China. Since early 2018, a multitude of voices, including government ministers, have emphasised that Sweden should not be naive about China.⁴⁷ The authorities tasked with national security

⁴⁰ Pew Research Center, *Trump's International Ratings Remain Low, Especially Among Key Allies*, 01.10.18, p. 56, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/10/01/trumps-international-ratings-remain-low-especially-among-key-allies/>.

⁴¹ Note that the media reactions are not necessarily representative of the "Swedish reaction" as a whole. It is possible that some people agreed with the content of the Chinese campaign but did not react publicly to it.

⁴² Data from Mediarkivet (www.retriever.se/product/mediarkivet). Searches were conducted using the search terms "Gui Congyou" and "kinesiska ambassaden" [the Chinese embassy]. News items, op-eds, interviews and radio programmes published or broadcast between 01.01.18 and 28.02.19 were selected and counted if they discussed the propaganda campaign but not if they only referred to it in passing.

⁴³ Chinese Embassy statement 23.08.18; Chinese Embassy statement 03.05.19.

⁴⁴ Margot Wallström, "Arbetet för fängslade Gui Minhai pågår med full kraft", *Expressen*, 06.05.19, <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/arbetet-for-fangslade-gui-minhai-pagar-med-full-kraft/>.

⁴⁵ EEAS, "Statement by the Spokesperson on the recent conviction of Chinese human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang", 28.01.19, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/57291/statement-spokesperson-recent-conviction-chinese-human-rights-lawyer-wang-quanzhang_en.

⁴⁶ SVT Nyheter, "Forskare: Kina bedriver unik kampanj mot Sverige", 23.05.19, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/kina-3>.

⁴⁷ See e.g. Defence Minister Peter Hultkvist quoted in *Aftonbladet*/TT, "Kinainvesteringar kan bli säkerhetsrisker", 13.01.19.



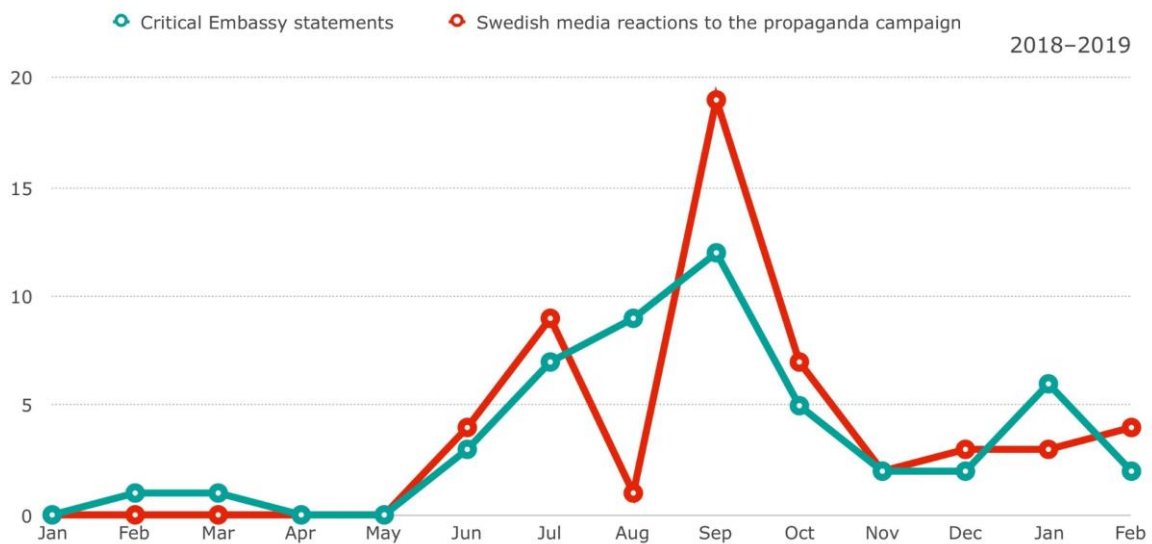
have directed an unprecedented level of attention to the country and the Swedish foreign ministry declared in early 2019 that a “China strategy” was being prepared.⁴⁸

All of this suggests that the campaign has not reshaped Swedish policy or public discourse in the direction desired by Beijing. Nonetheless, it is possible that the embassy’s public activity has brought about creeping self-censorship. The embassy’s targeting and public denunciation of individual journalists and activists makes it more likely that people who are uncomfortable about being confronted publicly – and many Swedes would qualify – will refrain from voicing their opinions. Also, regardless of how ill-conceived and unsuccessful the campaign may seem in Sweden, it is possible that it will discourage

public criticism from other European nations eager to maintain stable relations with China.

To conclude, the episode sheds light on the persistent limitations of China’s foreign propaganda work. Thus far, the campaign seems to have contributed to an even more negative image of the Chinese government in the Swedish public discourse. It has also increased media interest in China-related affairs, which reduces the likelihood that any concessions by the Swedish government might pass under the radar. As a direct result of its proactive approach, Beijing’s chances of successfully influencing political life in Sweden have probably been reduced. By launching a combative campaign ill-adapted to local conditions, China appears to have shot itself in the foot.

Figure 4. Critical Embassy statements and Swedish media reactions to the propaganda campaign



<https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/5VaW6O/kinainvesteringar-kan-bli-sakerhetsrisker>.

⁴⁸ Swedish Security Service (Säpo), Yearbook 2018,

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Margot Wallström, “Statement of government policy”, 13.02.19,

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