



What Do Swedes Think about China?

Insights from an Extensive Survey of Swedish Public Opinion of China

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Summary

- Two-thirds of Swedes hold negative views of China while close to 80 percent distrust the country. These are the results of the comprehensive European public opinion survey that is presented in this report. Of the 13 European countries included in the survey, China's public image is the most negative in Sweden.
- Negative public opinion of China in Sweden is partly a new development. Almost 60 percent of the respondents report that their general views of China have worsened in the past three years.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has likely contributed to China's negative public image in Sweden. Less than five percent of the respondents think that China has helped Sweden during the crisis. Even fewer believe that China's international reputation has improved during the pandemic.
- However, the fact that Swedish negative opinion stands out in an international comparison is likely tied to dissatisfaction with China's treatment of the Swedish government and Swedish citizens. In addition, the results indicate that concerns about the human rights situation in China are important to Swedish views of the country. These concerns likely skew public opinion in a negative direction.
- Despite their generally critical perception of China, the survey does not indicate that Swedes call for a hard-line approach to China or disengagement from the country. Swedes recognize China's importance to the Swedish economy and welcome cooperation with China in meeting global challenges. Moreover, the results show only limited support for a number of recently discussed policy measures in Sweden, such as the expulsion of China's ambassador or the ending of sister-city cooperation with China.
- At the same time, the survey does not suggest that Swedes are open to all kinds of cooperation with China. For example, less than 20 percent are positive about working with China in the development of Sweden's 5G mobile networks.



China's deteriorating image in Sweden

Two-thirds (67 percent) of Swedes have a negative or highly negative perception of China, compared to just 15 percent who have a positive view of the country (see figure 1). The remaining 18 percent are neutral. At the same time, negative perception of China as a country contrasts with quite positive perceptions of Chinese people in Sweden. These are some of the main findings of a

comprehensive public opinion survey in 13 European countries led by the Palacký University Olomouc in the Czech Republic.¹ The survey represents the most extensive recent exploration of the Swedish public's views on China. Mostly negative views were also found in the other EU member states included in the poll (apart from Latvia), but the Swedish results stand out.² In none of the other surveyed countries are the negative views expressed as widespread as in Sweden.

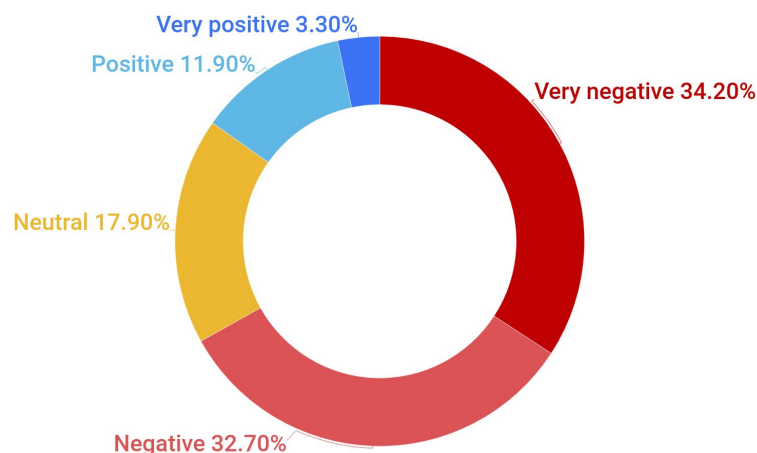


Figure 1: How positive or negative do you feel about China? (in percent)

Moreover, Swedes have a more negative perception of China than of many other countries (see figure 2). On

a scale of 0 (negative) to 100 (positive), China receives an average score of just 33. Of the other countries included in

¹ The "Sinophone Borderlands" survey was organized as part of a research project being carried out at the Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic, with partners in 13 countries. The surveyed countries are the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. UI has been the Swedish partner in the project. The study is financed by the European Regional Development Fund project "Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges", CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791. The data was collected online in local languages by NMS Market Research in September and October 2020. In Sweden, 1534 respondents between the ages of 18 and 70

participated. The research sample was representative of the Swedish population with respect to gender, age, level of education, country region and settlement density. The statistical margin for error is 1.5 percent. The questions and answers presented in this paper have been translated from the Swedish questionnaire. Some of the questions in the descriptions of the figures have been slightly abbreviated for increased readability.

² Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Šimalčík et al., "European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19", November 2020, <https://sinofon.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COMP-poll-final.pdf> (accessed 17 November 2020).



the question, only North Korea and – by a slim margin – Russia score worse than China. Taiwan (52) and China’s Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong (53) both rate noticeably higher.

Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Japan perform even better, while the results for India and the United States are relatively low at 48 and 47, respectively.

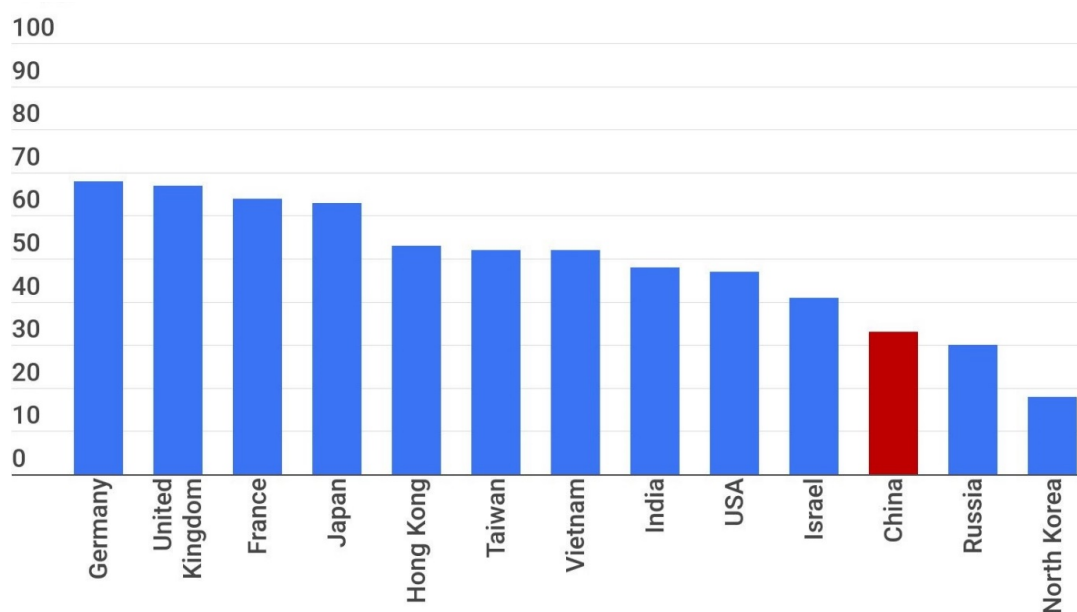


Figure 2: On a scale of 0 (negative) to 100 (positive), how positive or negative do you feel about the following countries/entities? (mean values)

Not only is China’s image in Sweden overwhelmingly negative, but it has deteriorated in recent years (see figure 3). A total of 59 percent of the survey participants say that their general view of China has worsened over the past three years. This stands in sharp contrast to the 7 percent who indicate

that their view has improved. The remaining respondents report no change. This is in line with findings from the Pew Research Center,³ in which the proportion of Swedes who expressed an unfavourable opinion of China increased from 52 percent to 85 percent between 2018 and 2020.⁴

³ For several years, the Pew Research Center has conducted an annual public opinion poll on international affairs including the image of China in several European states. The advantage of this survey is that it captures the development of views over time. The survey that is presented in this paper, in turn, is much more detailed in capturing specific information on a wide range of issues related to China. Other polls, including those published by

Eurobarometer and the European Council on Foreign Relations, also provide useful information about Swedish views on China.

⁴ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, “Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries” Pew Research Center, October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/> (accessed 15 October 2020).

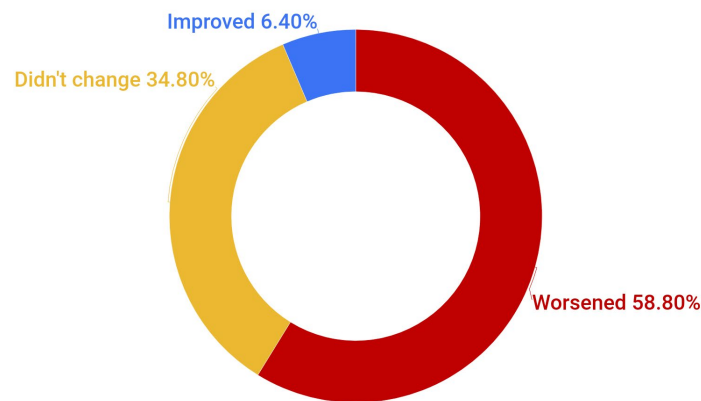


Figure 3: Has your general view of China got better or worse during the last three years? (in percent)

These negative perceptions are accompanied by low levels of trust in China (see figure 4): 79 percent of the respondents distrust or strongly distrust China, while only about one in 16 Swedes say that they trust the country.

This falls only slightly short of the Swedish distrust of Russia and contrasts with notably higher levels of trust in the United States and – even more so – the EU.

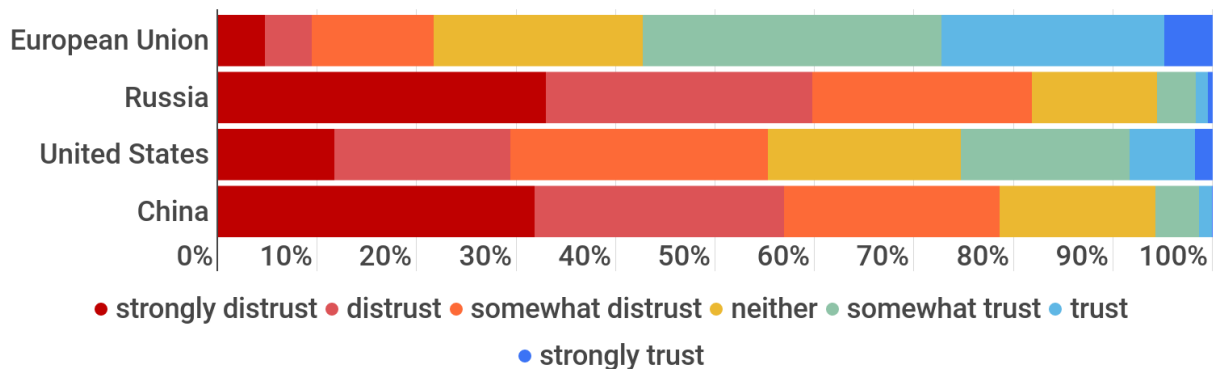


Figure 4: How much do you trust or distrust the following countries/entities? (in percent)

Distrust of China also seems to extend to perceptions of how Chinese people are seen in Sweden (see figure 5).⁵ Just 14 percent of the Swedish respondents believed that Chinese people were generally regarded as honest. Sincerity and trustworthiness achieved equally

poor ratings, at 15 percent and 16 percent, respectively. This contrasts with approval for qualities that are conducive to economic development: 75 percent of Swedish respondents thought that Chinese people were perceived in Sweden as productive. A

⁵ Note that the question asks the respondent to describe not her or his own opinion, but the opinion of others. In general, people tend to ascribe biased or stereotyped opinions to others rather than

themselves. But using this type of phrasing, we assume that most respondents will answer according to their own opinion.



smaller majority agreed that there is a general perception of Chinese people as competitive (58 percent) and competent (57 percent). Significant minorities say

the same about Chinese people being confident (39 percent) and friendly (36 percent).

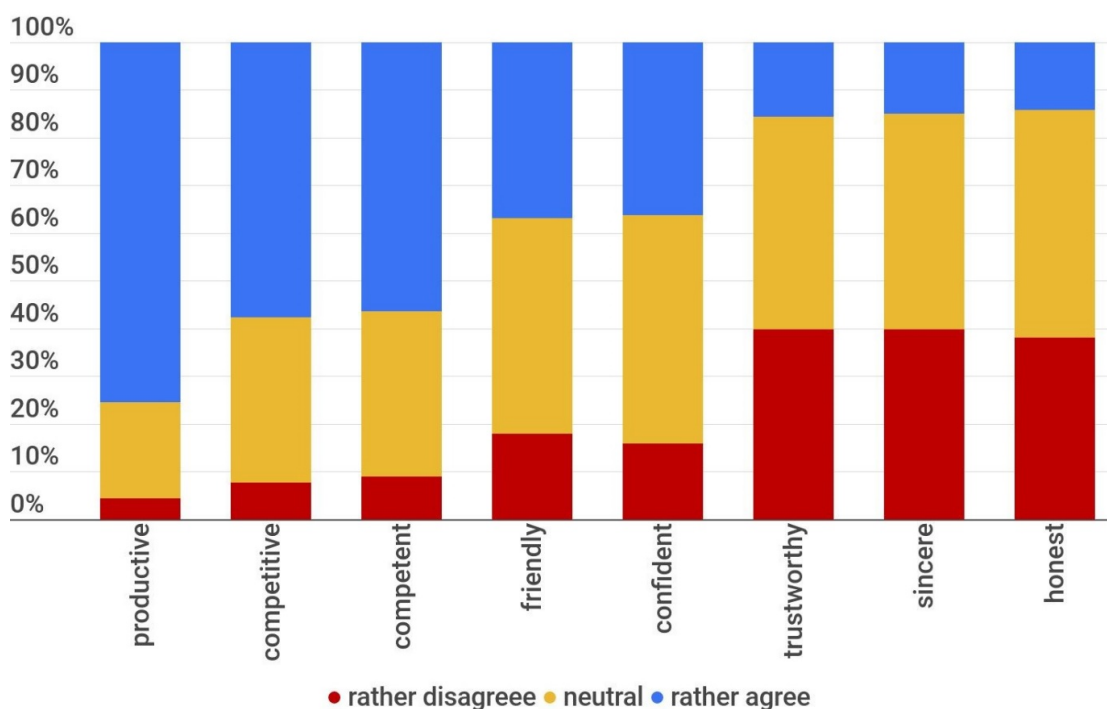


Figure 5: How are Chinese people viewed in your country? (in percent)

These findings do not mean that Swedes hold negative views of ethnic Chinese in the country (see figure 6). When respondents were asked how they felt about Chinese people living, studying or travelling in Sweden, they gave quite positive answers, ranging from the low to mid-sixties on a scale of 0 (negative) to 100 (positive). Reflecting the unfavourable view of China's

political system seen in other parts of the survey, however, Chinese politicians are given a low approval rating with a mean value of 27. That Chinese dissidents do not score higher than 50 might be surprising, given Sweden's traditional self-identification as a defender of human rights and democracy.⁶

⁶ For the role of political values in the China policies of Sweden and other European countries, see Tim Nicholas Rühl, Björn Jerdén et al., "Political values in Europe-China relations", European Think-tank Network on China, December 2018, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se->

[eng/research/asia/full-report-web-version_updated_2019.pdf](https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/research/asia/full-report-web-version_updated_2019.pdf) (accessed 17 November 2020). Another possibility for the relatively neutral ratings given to Chinese dissidents could be a lack of familiarity with the term among some Swedish participants.

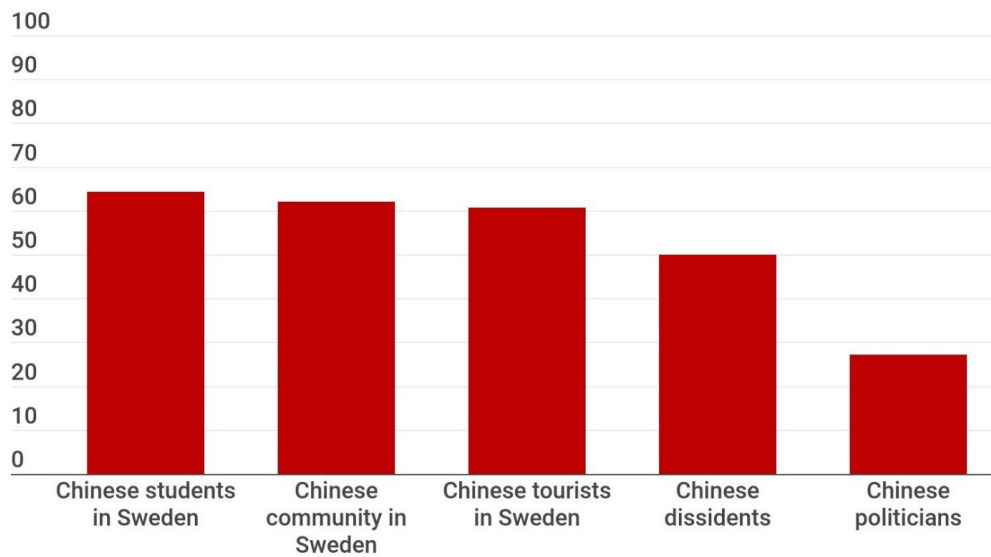


Figure 6: On a scale of 0 (negative) to 100 (positive), how do you feel about the following groups of people? (mean value)

What explains China's negative image in Sweden?

Together with other studies, our survey provides important clues as to what is behind the generally negative perceptions of China in Sweden. First

and foremost, most of the Swedish population relies on secondary sources when forming their opinions about China. Only 10 percent of the respondents have visited the country. In contrast, 95 percent have travelled to other European countries, 40 percent to the United States, and 64 percent to other non-European countries (see figure 7).

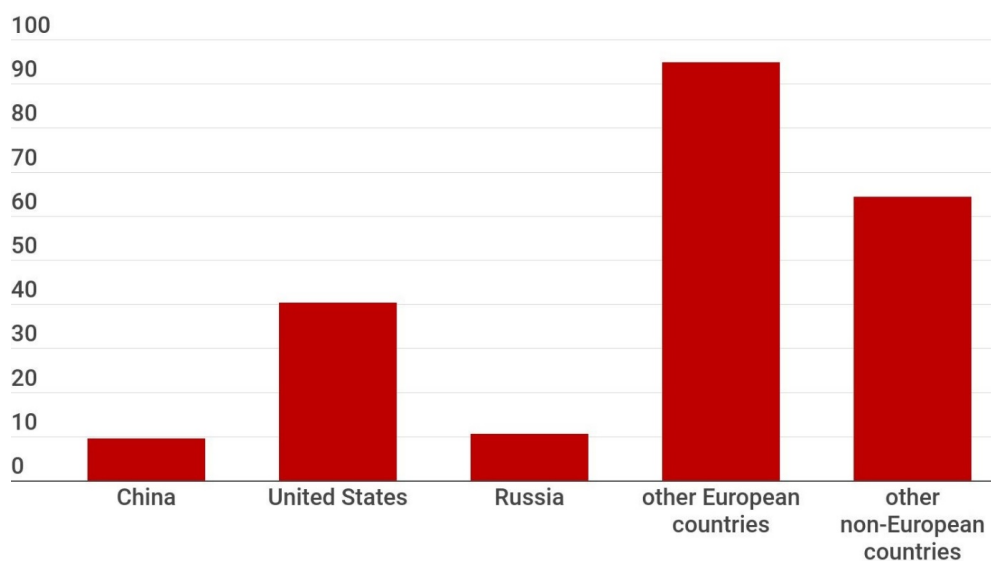


Figure 7: Have you visited the following countries? (in percent)



In common with the low proportion of people with personal experience of China, the level of self-reported knowledge of the country is also relatively low. Only 12 percent believe

they know quite a lot about China, while 36 percent report low levels of knowledge. The remaining 52 percent indicate a certain degree of familiarity (see figure 8).

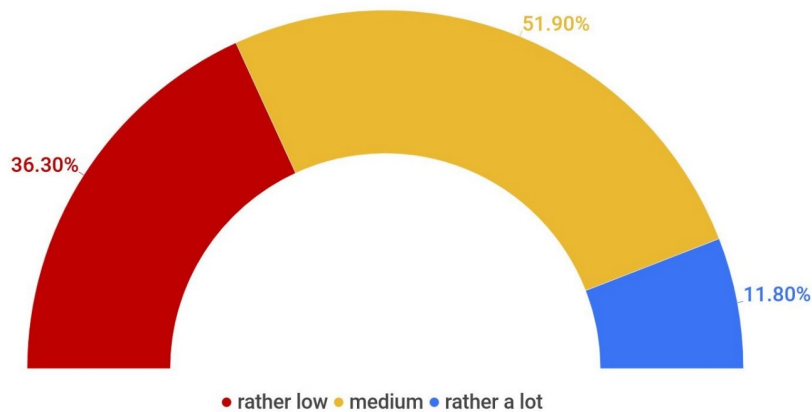


Figure 8: How much do you know about China? (in percent)

In the absence of a high number of Swedes who have travelled to China, it is no wonder that personal experience is reported as the least important source of information about the country (see figure 9). The experiences of friends and family who have visited China have a higher impact. Moreover, only 5 percent indicate that Chinese acquaintances have had a significant impact on their opinion of China. In other words, while respondents have a relatively positive impression of Chinese in Sweden, direct contact with them seems to play only a

marginal role in forming their opinions about China.

The news media is by far the main source of Swedes' information about China; 63 percent stated that it is an important source of information about the country. Moreover, 30 percent rely on social media, closely followed by politicians' statements at 28 percent. In contrast, books are only a minor direct influence on public opinion, while 65 percent report that they are of little importance.

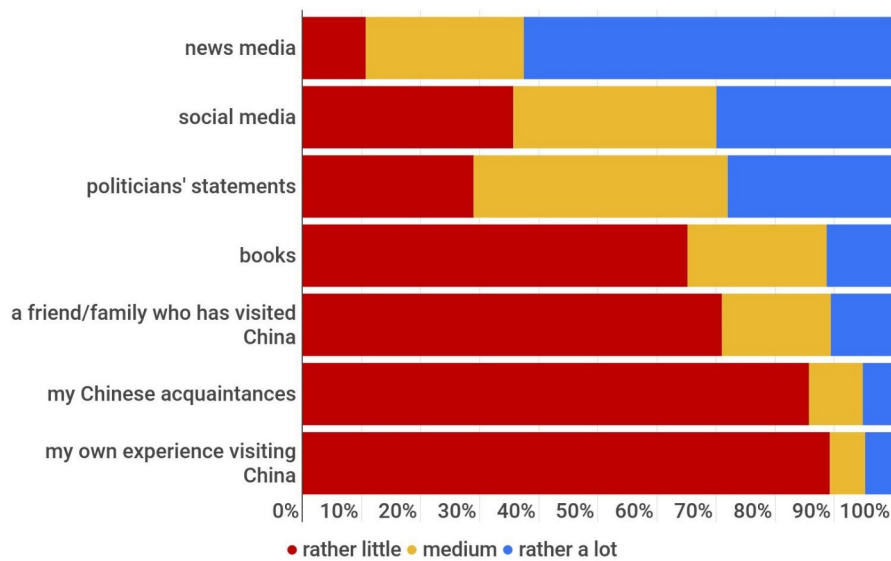


Figure 9: To what degree do you use the following sources when you inform yourself about China? (in percent)

Forthcoming UI research puts these findings into perspective.⁷ An analysis of editorials on China published in Sweden's four leading daily newspapers demonstrates an increasingly critical coverage of China. Only a few years ago, the editorials often combined a discussion of the challenges arising from China's political system with the hope that the country could change for the better in the future. Such optimism has almost entirely vanished on a wide range of topics. Moreover, reporting on human rights issues exceeds that on economic affairs if the entire Swedish newspaper coverage is taken into account.⁸ While references to human rights tend to be critical of the Chinese government, coverage of economic affairs contains a wide variety of angles, some of which are more critical than others. Hence, we assume that the high and increasing share of human rights

issues in the reporting of China provides a rough indication of the relatively critical coverage of the country in the Swedish print media. The recent change in the media discourse could therefore have accentuated the rather negative image of China in Sweden.

That said, the fact that negative Swedish views on China stand out in an international comparison is likely connected to recent developments between the two countries. A diplomatic rift with China has received widespread media attention in Sweden. At the centre is the treatment of Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen who has been held in Chinese custody since 2015. The Chinese government threatened Sweden with economic retaliation in protest at a Swedish minister's attendance at an award ceremony honouring Gui in 2019. This has been

⁷ Tim Rühlig and Oscar Shao, "China's dwindling soft power in Sweden." In: Dams, Ties et al. (eds.): "Soft power in Europe-China relations", forthcoming report of the European Think-tank Network on China.

⁸ The analysis of Swedish print news media covers the period 2003-2020. Editorials were examined from 2007-2020.



accompanied by a sustained campaign of public criticism of government agencies, media companies, politicians, journalists, researchers, human rights activists and others who air views that contradict China's official position on various issues.⁹ Public dissatisfaction with the Chinese government's behaviour has likely contributed to the rise in negative views of China.

China is a divisive issue in some European states and party-political preferences correlate with more or less negative views of the country, but this does not seem to be the case in Sweden. Figure 10 shows little variation in the general opinion of China across the political spectrum. This agreement is also reflected in official China policy.

The government's 2019 report, "Approach to matters relating to China" – the most authoritative Swedish document on China policy, was endorsed by the parliament without objections. Nonetheless, China policy has become a more contentious issue in the past two years. In May 2020, for example, a majority in parliament forced the minority government to make Sweden the only EU member state that pushed for joint sanctions against China in response to the imposition of the Hong Kong security law. However, the survey results support the view that, rather than being the result of sharp differences in views on China, such disagreements are mainly linked to the general parliamentary dynamic between the government and the opposition.

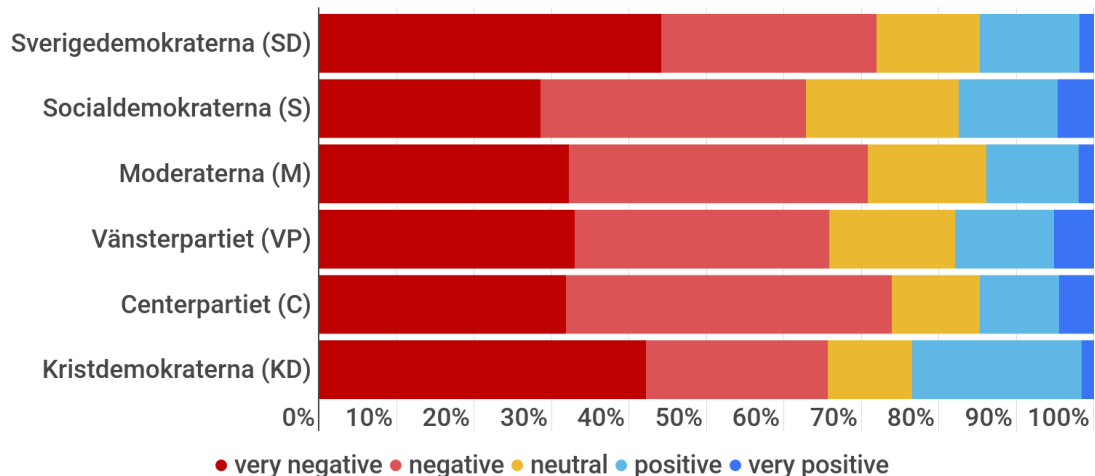


Figure 10: General opinion of China sorted by party affiliation (in percent).

The survey also includes questions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on perceptions of China (see

figure 11). Here, 53 percent agree that the coronavirus jumped naturally from animals to humans. Echoing claims

⁹ Björn Jerdén and Viking Bohman, "China's propaganda campaign in Sweden, 2018–2019", UI Brief 4/2019, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui-se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-brief-no.-4-2019.pdf> (accessed 17 November 2020); Patrik Oksanen, "Kinas attacker för att tysta kritiker",

September 2020, <https://frivarld.se/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Kinas-attacker-for-att-tysta-kritiker.pdf> (accessed 17 November 2020).



made by US President Donald Trump,¹⁰ however, non-negligible minorities believe that the pandemic originated in a Chinese laboratory and either escaped accidentally (23 percent) or was spread intentionally (18 percent). Moreover, 57 percent believe that COVID-19 spread because Chinese people eat bats and wild animals. Only 5 percent agreed with the proposition that the US military brought the virus into China, a theory

disseminated by China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian.¹¹ Moreover, although the COVID-19 situation in China at the time of the survey was considerably better than in most countries, 80 percent of Swedish respondents disagreed that China's international reputation had been improved by its response to the pandemic.

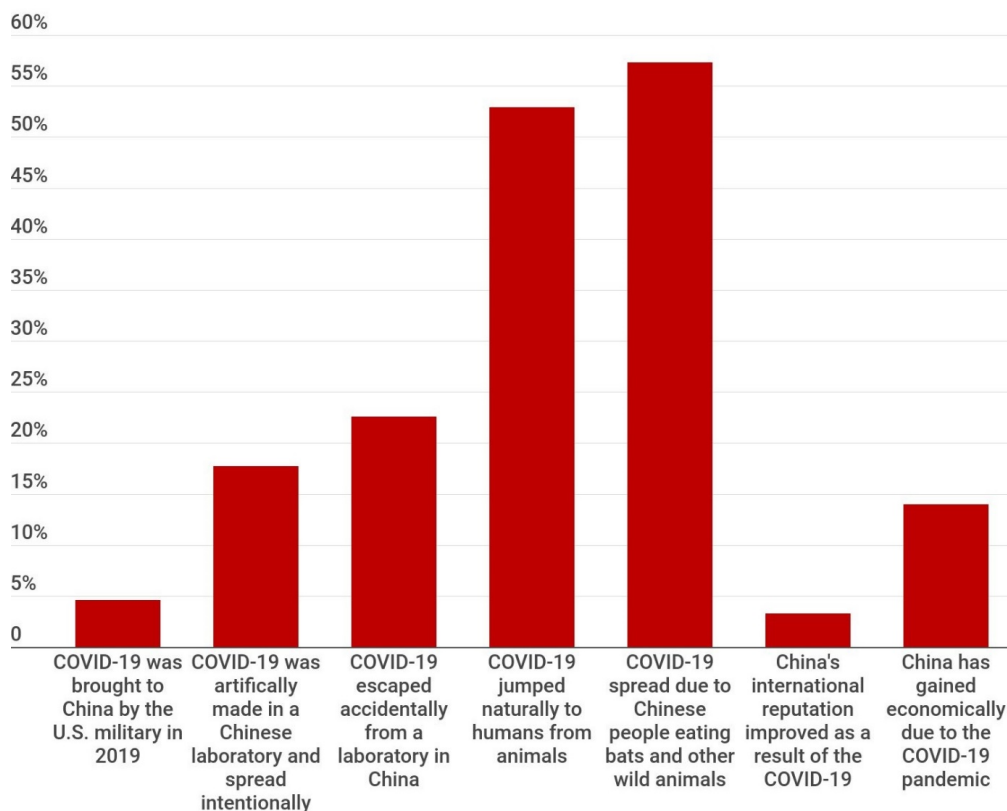


Figure 11: Do you agree with the following statements? (in percent)

These findings can be considered together with a recent YouGov poll, in which 66 percent of the Swedish

participants voiced the belief that the pandemic could have been prevented if the Chinese authorities had acted

¹⁰ Zachary Cohen, Alex Marquardt, et al, "Trump contradicts US intel community by claiming he's seen evidence coronavirus originated in Chinese lab", CNN, 1 May 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/30/politics/trump-intelligence-community-china-coronavirus-origins/index.html> (accessed 19 November 2020).

¹¹ Sarah Zheng, "Chinese foreign ministry spokesman tweets claim US military brought coronavirus to Wuhan", March 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3075051/chinese-foreign-ministry-spokesman-tweets-claim-us-military> (accessed 19 November 2020).



differently. Moreover, 79 percent believed that China initially attempted to hide the truth about the pandemic.¹² Taken together, these results suggest that the pandemic has probably worsened China's reputation in Sweden. The above cited poll by the Pew Research Center finds that people with a negative view of China tend to rate China's handling of the pandemic worse than others. Among all the European countries in their study, however, this correlation is the weakest in Sweden.¹³ This suggests that negative Swedish views are comparatively less tied to the coronavirus pandemic and based on other issues, such as those discussed above.

Sceptical but not hawkish: Swedish views on policy towards China

This sceptical view of China also has an impact on Swedes' preferences for policy alignment (see figure 12). Only 6 percent of respondents would favour Sweden aligning its foreign policy with China. Coordination with Russian foreign policy finds a comparable level of support. By contrast, 70 percent favour foreign policy alignment with the EU, of which Sweden, of course, is a member. However, although Swedish policy cooperation with the United States runs deep, not least in matters of national defence, only 27 percent favour policy alignment with the country.

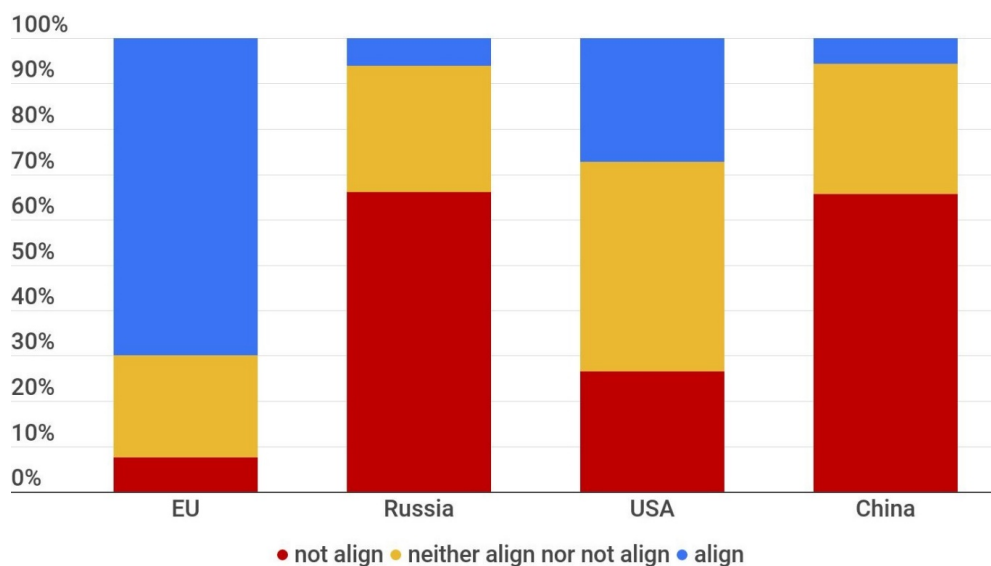


Figure 12: How closely should Sweden's foreign policy be aligned with the following actors? (in percent)

¹² YouGov, "Globalism 2020", September 2020, http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/tw9r0y4ji9/Globalism2020%20Guardian%20COVID%20China%20Attitudes.pdf (accessed 19 November 2020). The poll was conducted between 30 July and 24 August 2020. In Sweden, 1047 adults were interviewed.

¹³ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries" Pew Research Center, October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/> (accessed 15 October 2020).



Sweden's traditional self-perception as a principled defender of human rights and democracy shapes expectations of its foreign policy preferences with China (see figure 13). Asked about Sweden's foreign policy priorities in its relations with China, 82 percent favoured advancing human rights and democratic reform. This slightly outperformed cooperation on global issues such as

climate change, epidemics and counterterrorism, which had a support of 81 percent of respondents. Cybersecurity challenges (78 percent) and addressing intellectual property rights violations (67 percent) followed while, at 59 percent, support for the promotion of trade and investment was surprisingly low for such an export-oriented country as Sweden.

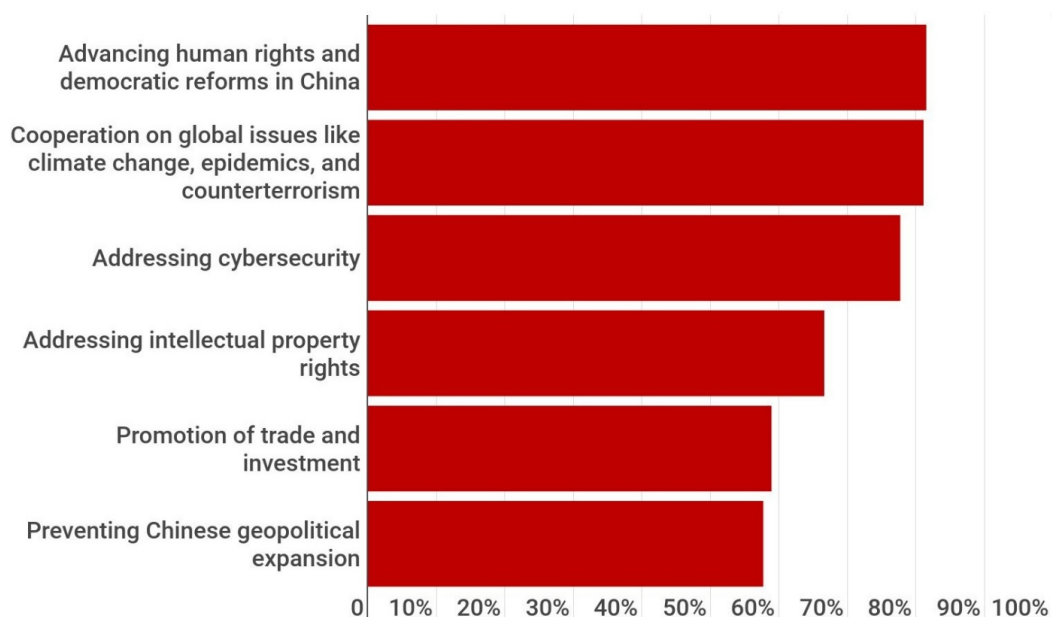


Figure 13: What should be Sweden's foreign policy priorities in the relations with China? (in percent)

Citing security concerns, the Swedish Post and Telecom Authority (PTS) decided in October 2020 to exclude two Chinese vendors, Huawei and ZTE, from its rollout of the broadly defined "central functions" of Sweden's 5G mobile network. Scepticism towards cooperation with China in this area appears to have some support in Swedish public opinion (see figure 14). Respondents were asked whether they favoured cooperation on 5G infrastructure with EU member states,

the United States, Japan, South Korea and China – the leading countries in this field. China performed worst with only 19 percent expressing either approval or strong approval. There was also some reluctance, although to a lesser degree, regarding potential cooperation with South Korea (39 percent approval) and the United States (43 percent). Collaboration with Japan (54 percent) and EU member states (75 percent) was supported by a majority.

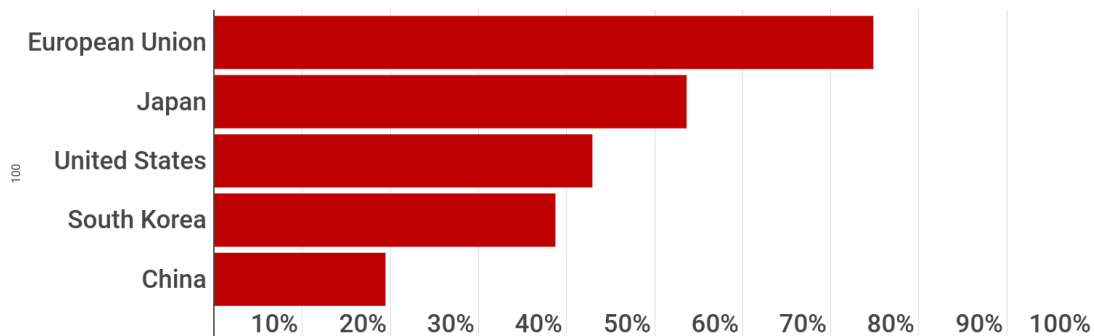


Figure 14: In case of the buildout of the 5G mobile infrastructure, with which countries should Sweden cooperate? (in percent)

However, this does not mean that Swedes disapprove of Chinese technology altogether (see figure 15). Asked their opinion about a range of

Chinese policies, behaviours and products, technology scored best with a mean value of 55 on a scale of 0 (negative) to 100 (positive).

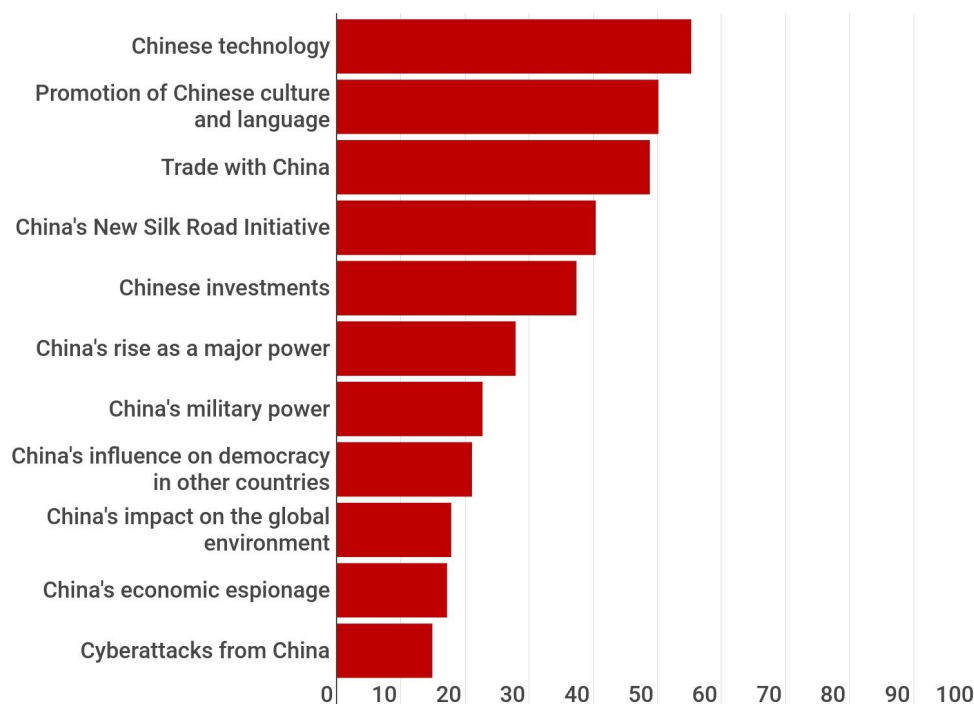


Figure 15: On a scale of 0 to 100, how positive or negative do you feel about the following issues? (mean values)

The treatment of Gui Minhai (see above) is another widely discussed China-related topic in Sweden. Opposition

parties have called for an independent commission to evaluate the government's wider treatment of the



case.¹⁴ When asked how well the Swedish government has handled the issue, dissatisfaction exceeds satisfaction among the population (see figure 16). However, the high level of

undecided respondents could indicate that the issue is of rather low salience to the Swedish population or that they consider it very difficult to solve.

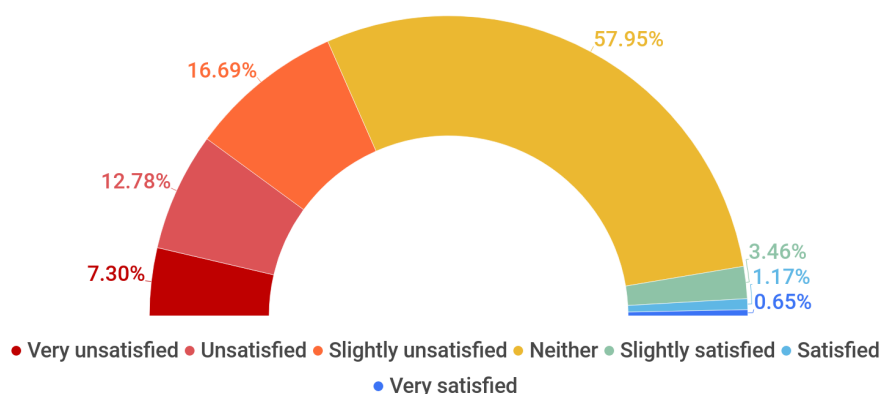


Figure 16: Gui Minhai is a Swedish citizen who has been detained in China. How satisfied are you with how the Swedish government has handled the case? (in percent)

Moreover, 58 percent of Swedes believe that China bears responsibility for the recent tensions between the two countries (see figure 17). Given the dominant media and political discourse

on the issue in Sweden, however, it might be surprising that one in five Swedes still place equal responsibility on both sides. Another 3 percent believes Sweden bears the main responsibility.¹⁵

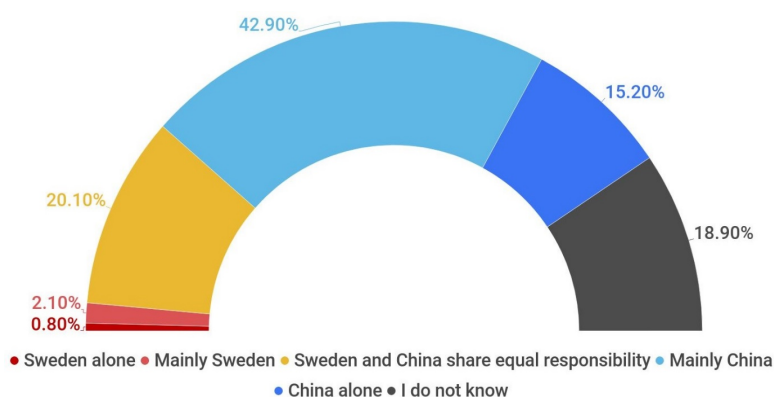


Figure 17: Which side do you think bears responsibility for current tensions between Sweden and China? (in percent)

¹⁴ Hans Wallmark and Håkan Svenneling, "Granska regeringen i fallet med Gui Minhai", *Aftonbladet*, 6 August 2020, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/zGd1Q1/gransk>

a-regeringen-i-fallet-med-gui-minhai (accessed 20 November 2020).

¹⁵ One could hypothesise that critics of the government come from the voter base of opposition parties. However, we have not explored this question.



In connection with this and other diplomatic tensions, three Swedish opposition parties – the Left Party, the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats – have called on the government to expel China's ambassador. Even though at the time of writing these parties are supported by

around 36 percent of voters, only 11 percent of respondents support this demand (see figure 18) while 47 percent rejected the proposal. Another 42 percent are undecided, which could indicate that many Swedes have not followed the case closely enough to form a clear opinion.

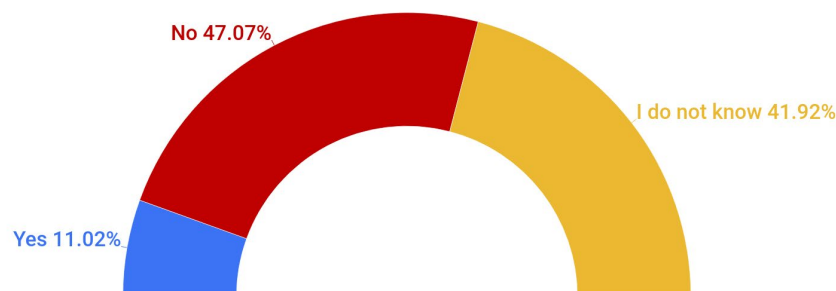


Figure 18: Some parties in the parliament want the Swedish government to expel China's ambassador in Sweden. However, others believe that this could hamper contacts with China and damage Swedish interests. Do you think the Chinese ambassador should be expelled? (in percent)

Local government cooperation is another area of Swedish-Chinese relations that has seen rapid change in recent years. Citing the Chinese government's human rights violations and threats against Sweden, several Swedish municipalities and regions have ended twinning arrangements with Chinese counterparts since 2018.¹⁶ While many people hold no opinion, such decisions find limited support in

the survey (see figure 19): 37 percent of respondents disagree with ending sister-city cooperation while 24 approve of the proposal.

In sum, while Swedes are generally critical of the Chinese government, the results of the survey do not suggest that they favour an overall hard-line policy toward China or disengagement from the country.

¹⁶ Björn Jerdén, Gustav Sundqvist and Alina Engström, forthcoming manuscript.

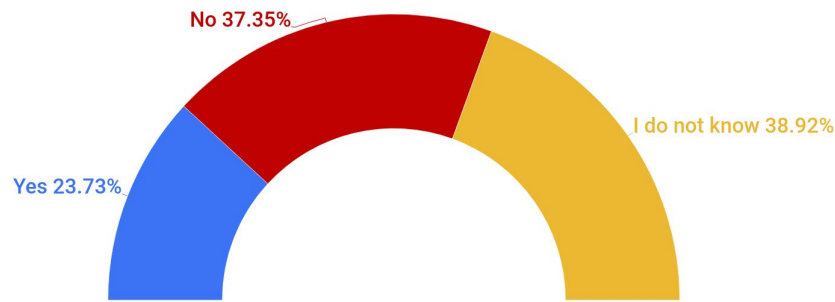


Figure 19: Several municipalities and regions in Sweden have ended their so-called twinning partnerships with China, citing China's human rights violations and threats against the Swedish government. However, others believe it is important to retain contacts to promote economic exchange and maintain the opportunity to influence developments in China. Do you support the ending of these twinning partnerships with China? (in percent)

Swedish public opinion on China in comparison with other great powers

There has been a debate in recent years about how the EU should position itself in a triangle with the United States and China.¹⁷ The US-China rivalry is sometimes interpreted as a zero-sum game in which the losses of one side are equated with gains in popularity and reputation for the other. This apparently does not hold true in Sweden.

One example is the cultural attractiveness of the United States and

China. Although US popular culture has had a thoroughgoing impact on the Swedish society for the past seven decades, the United States performs remarkably badly on cultural attractiveness. Only 42 percent of respondents indicate that it is either attractive or very attractive. However, China does not fare any better. Only 36 percent of respondents see China as culturally attractive or very attractive. Russia scores even worse: only 22 percent find its culture attractive. The EU far outperforms all three major powers: 61 percent of the Swedish population regards European culture as attractive or very attractive (see figure 20).¹⁸

¹⁷ Mario Esteban and Miguel Otero-Iglesias, "Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry", European Think-tank Network on China, December 2019, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se->

[eng/research/asia/etnc_report_2020_us-china-europe.pdf](https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/research/asia/etnc_report_2020_us-china-europe.pdf) (accessed 17 November 2020).

¹⁸ When interpreting the results in this section, one should keep in mind that Sweden itself is a member of the EU.

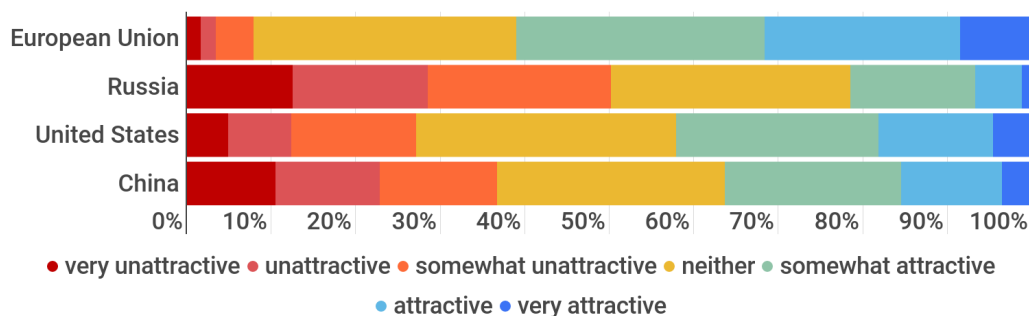


Figure 20: How culturally attractive or unattractive do you find the following countries/entities? (in percent)

China's human rights record is given a low score by 88 percent of Swedes (see figure 21) – the highest proportion among the 13 European countries surveyed. Although there is no data on whether this percentage has increased in recent years, one hypothesis would be that media reports of human rights abuses in Xinjiang and the erosion of civil liberties in Hong Kong have had an

impact on Swedish public opinion. Even Russia performs slightly better: "only" 86 percent see its human rights record as negative or very negative. The United States also scores relatively poorly (49 percent). In contrast to these three major powers, the EU scores well; 70 percent of the respondents believe that the human rights situation in the EU is either positive or very positive.

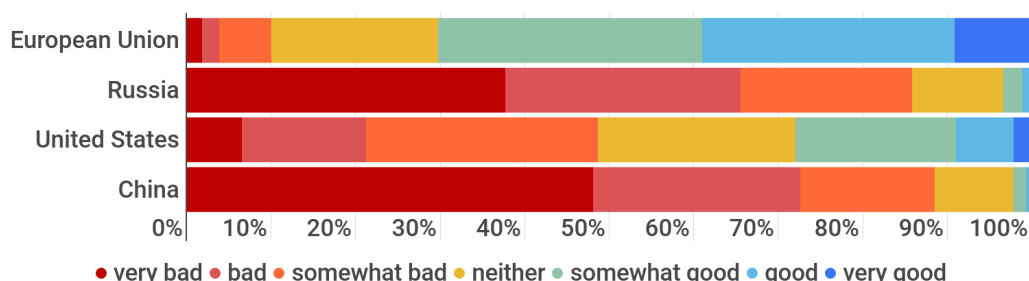


Figure 21: How positive or negative do you think the human rights situation is in the following countries/entities? (in percent)

The perceived human rights record can be particularly important to Swedes' general views of a country. Sweden has traditionally strongly identified itself as a human rights defender. It is notable that when the Swedish respondents were asked to express the word or phrase they first associated with China, it was "dictatorship" that appeared most frequently (see figure 22). In almost all the other countries in the survey,

"COVID-19" topped the list. Apart from these two words, "Communism" and "no human rights" were among the most common words or phrases associated with China by the Swedish respondents. This suggests that the nature of China's political system has an important impact on Swedish perceptions of the country more generally.



Figure 22: Word cloud of the terms expressed most when asking for a first association with China.

When Swedes were asked how they thought life in China was for people like them, China's image problem in Sweden again became apparent (see figure 23). Although high Chinese economic growth has reduced poverty by a wide margin since the 1980s, Swedes do not regard China as a good place to live.

Only 16 percent of the respondents believe that people "like them" have a good or very good life in China. In contrast, 50 percent believe this of the United States and 78 percent say the same thing about people living in the EU.

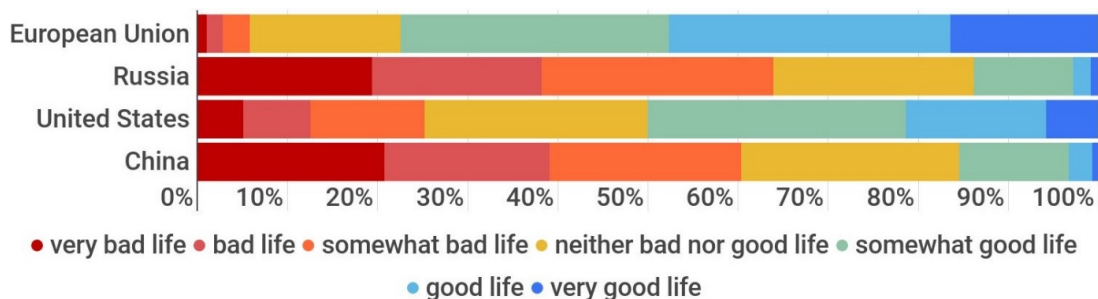


Figure 23: How do you assess the life quality of people like you in the following countries/entities? (in percent)

Nor does China profit from the low approval ratings for US foreign policy

among the Swedish respondents. Only 5 percent of Swedes see China's foreign



policy as positive, the same as the combined figure for Russia (see figure 24). Around one quarter of respondents are neutral, while a large majority (71 percent) describe Chinese foreign policy as negative. Moreover, at the end of

Donald Trump's time in the White House only 15 percent of Swedes see US foreign policy as positive. This contrasts with a 47 percent approval rating for EU foreign policy.

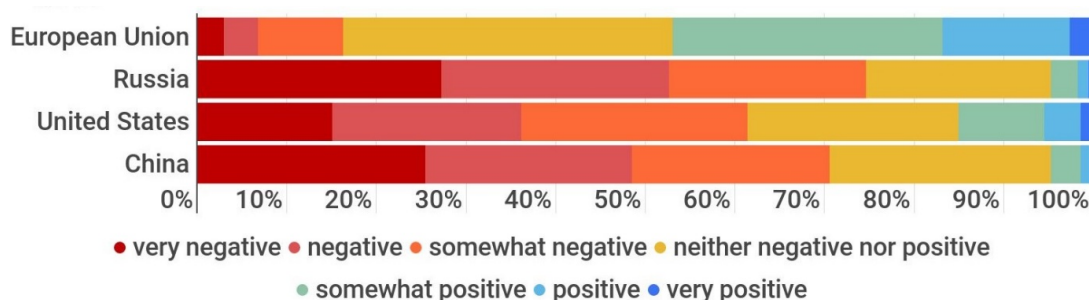


Figure 24: How positive or negative do you think is the foreign policy of the following countries/entities? (in percent)

This disapproval is mirrored in the perceptions of Chinese, US and Russian policy during the COVID-19 pandemic (see figure 25). Asked whether these three powers have helped Sweden during the pandemic, Russia scores

worst with only 1 percent believing that it has, followed by the United States at 2 percent. China was seen as helpful by 5 percent of the Swedish respondents while 29 percent acknowledged help from the EU during the pandemic.

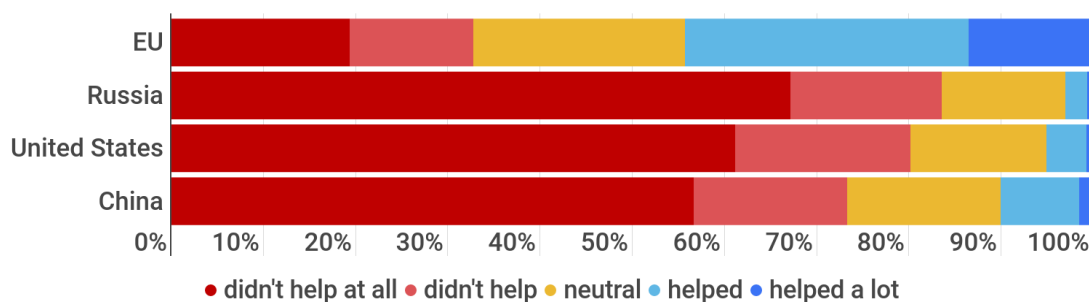


Figure 25: How much do you think have the following countries/entities helped Sweden in the COVID-19 pandemic? (in percent)

The widespread scepticism about China does not imply a lack of acknowledgement of the country's important role in international affairs (see figure 26). In fact, China is seen as the leading global economic power,

ahead of both the United States and the EU; 81 percent of respondents regard China as economically strong or very strong compared to 74 percent who say the same about the United States and 66 about the EU.

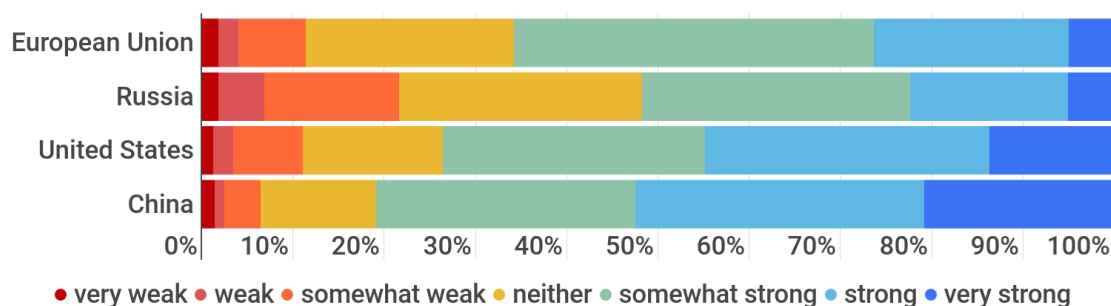


Figure 26: How economically powerful do you think are the following countries/entities? (in percent)

The Swedish population is very aware of the country's dependence on economic ties with the outside world (see figure 27). Over 68 percent of respondents see China, Sweden's second largest export market outside Europe, as important to

the development of the Swedish economy. The figure for the United States, Sweden's largest non-European export market, is even higher at 78 percent.

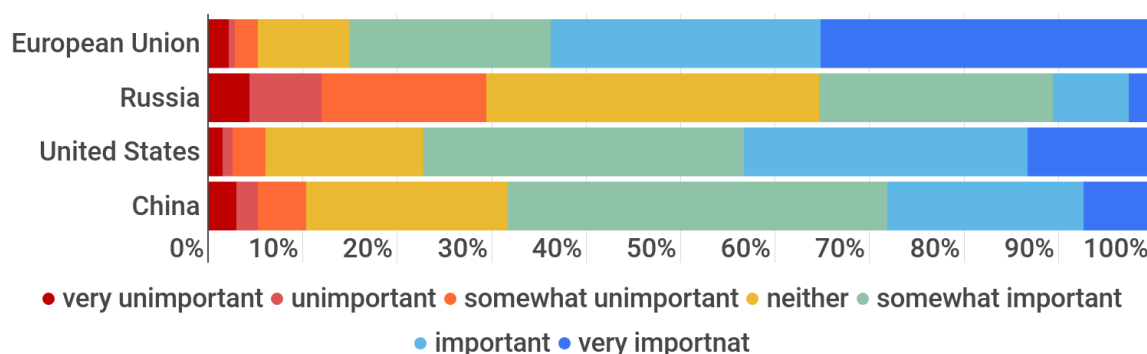


Figure 27: How important or unimportant do you think are the following countries/entities for the development of the Swedish economy? (in percent)

Although US military spending is around three times higher than that of China, and 11 times higher than that of Russia,¹⁹ than that of China and Russia, almost as many Swedes believe that these two countries are militarily

powerful, although more believe the United States to be "very strong". In contrast, only 43 percent see the EU as either militarily strong or very militarily strong (see figure 28).

¹⁹ SIPRI, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database", <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex> (accessed: 19 November 2020).

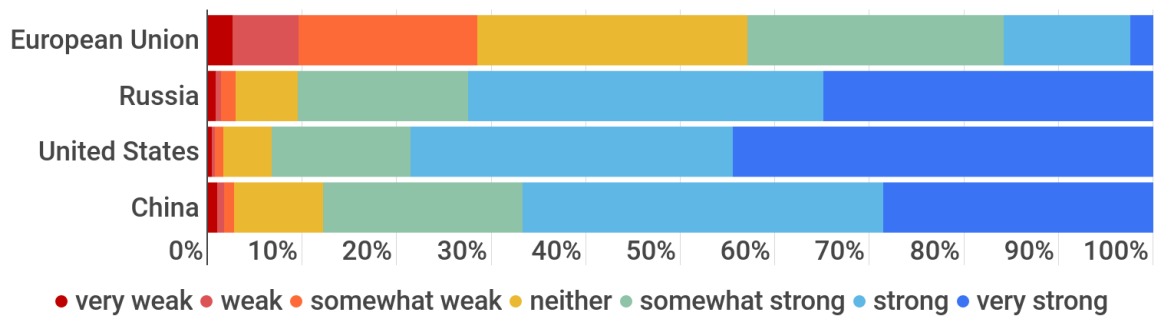


Figure 28: How militarily powerful do you think are the following countries/entities? (in percent)

Swedes have even greater faith in China's technological prowess (see figure 29). Some 24 percent of respondents believe that China is technologically a very advanced country, compared to 22 percent for the United States and 16 percent for the EU.

Adding together those who perceive the respective states as either technologically "advanced" or "very advanced", the United States and the EU are ranked first with a respective combined total of 83 percent, closely followed by China (81 percent).

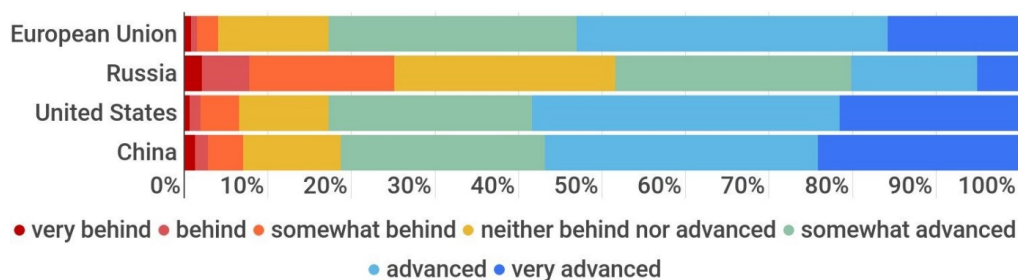


Figure 29: How technologically advanced do you think are the following countries/entities? (in percent)

Discussion

This report has presented survey results showing a sharp decline in Swedish views on China. China's public image seems to be more negative in Sweden than in any other European country. This trend has happened in parallel with increased bilateral interaction in many areas, such as trade, investments, and research collaboration. Apparently, growing ties between the countries alone have not helped China's public image in Sweden from deteriorating.

The roots of China's largely negative image in Sweden are deeper than the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that Swedish views stand out in an international comparison likely has much to do with the ongoing diplomatic rift between the countries. At the center of this dispute is the treatment of Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen who has been in Chinese custody since 2015. To protest the Swedish government's support for Gui, China has threatened Sweden with economic punishment and called off cultural cooperation.



The Chinese foreign ministry has also conducted a sustained campaign of public criticism against Swedish individuals and organizations that air views that contradict China's official position on various topics. These issues have received much attention in Swedish media and have likely contributed to the rise in negative views of China since 2018.

In addition, the survey gives some indications that the negative Swedish image of China might be relatively stable, even if bilateral relations were to improve.

The first reason for this is that questions related to human rights seem to be important for Swedish perceptions of China. Of all countries in the survey, Swedes give the lowest score to the human rights situation in China. Moreover, more than 80 percent believe that the advancement of human rights and democratic reforms in China should be a policy priority for Sweden. Furthermore, when Swedes were asked to give a word or phrase they associate with China, "dictatorship", "Communism" and "no human rights" appeared frequently. Unless the human rights situation in China improves, such concerns are likely to continue to skew Swedish public opinion in a negative direction.

The second reason for the likely stability of negative opinions about China is that these views show little variation across the political spectrum. Supporters of all

political parties in the Riksdag seem to have roughly equally critical views. This consensus suggests that the negative attitude has a broad base among the Swedish population and provides further reason to believe that the negative trend in Swedish public opinion about China will persist.

While the survey results discussed in this report provide several new insights into Swedish public opinion on China, one might question their political relevance. After all, neither foreign policy in general nor relations with China are among the issues that Swedish voters are most concerned about. Nonetheless, since China's role in world affairs is becoming more visible and leaders feel the need to respond to public views, the importance of public opinion in shaping relations between Sweden and China might very well increase. While the relationship with China might not be decisive or even important for democratic elections in Sweden, it is no longer a niche topic with which only diplomats and China experts are concerned.

Such a development, in turn, requires an informed public. The low self-reported knowledge about China seen in the survey is thus slightly concerning. In this respect, the survey reinforces the "need for investing in knowledge of China throughout our society" which was identified by the Swedish government in 2019.²⁰ Finally, a significant part of Sweden's relations with China run through the EU. Although the survey

²⁰ Government Offices of Sweden, "Approach to matters relating to China", November 2019, <https://www.government.se/legal->

[documents/2019/11/government-communication--20192018/](https://www.government.se/legal-documents/2019/11/government-communication--20192018/) (accessed 24 November 2020).



lacked detailed questions about the EU's China policy, the results demonstrate a strong public support for aligning Sweden's foreign policy within that of the Union.



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