

Sweden and China: The Use of History and Mismatched Expectations

by
Agust Börjesson

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Västra Finnbodavägen 2, 131 30 Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden

Tel. +46-841056953; Fax. +46-86403370

Email: info@isdpeu

Editorial correspondence should be directed to the address provided above (preferably by email).

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Abstract

Sweden was not the first country in the West that recognized the People's Republic of China, but it became the first in the West to establish formal diplomatic relations in 1950 because it was picked by China ahead of others to do so. This history has since been mutually emphasized on both sides, for different reasons. This paper examines the history of how Sweden established diplomatic relations with the PRC, outlining the historical context in which diplomatic relations were established and what it meant for the two countries at the time. The paper examines how the history of diplomatic relations has been used by the two countries and in which two country-specific context this use can be understood. For Sweden, that it became first in the West with relations to the PRC has retroactively fit into a narrative about the country as a diplomatic pioneer, associated primarily with the Social Democratic Party's vision of Stockholm as an independent foreign policy actor that emerged in the 1960s. Early relations with the PRC have been held up alongside early recognition of other states, during Sweden's "activist" foreign policy era to collectively emphasize this legacy. For the PRC, diplomatic history with Sweden has instead been part of its larger framework of using history as a tool on the international arena to build a consensus around Beijing's position and further its strategic interests. Through its comprehensive and flexible use of history, the PRC has attempted to simultaneously shape the view of the past and impact the course of the future. The paper concludes by arguing that mutual elevation of diplomatic history between Sweden and the PRC, based in two separate country-specific narratives, may have contributed to mismatched expectations when the two sides underwent a period of bilateral friction 2017-2021.

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Abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
GCI	Global Civilization Initiative
KMT	Kuomintang
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
US	United States of America
WHA	World Health Assembly

Introduction

The Chinese government's efforts to influence and shape other countries' public discourse and policies have garnered attention in Europe in recent years. In the Xi Jinping era, attention has often focused on Chinese diplomats' turn towards a more assertive style in advocating for the Chinese government's views, labeled as "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy". Sweden became an example of countries that experienced such assertive diplomacy by the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the two sides went through a period of notable friction in bilateral relations during the term of Chinese Ambassador Gui Congyou (2017-2021).¹ The Ambassador was summoned at the Swedish Foreign Ministry 40 times in five years.² In the process, Sweden became a global example of how the Chinese government argued for its position.

The Chinese government's use of assertive diplomacy has invited scrutiny of its diplomatic practices, arguments and narratives. However, the PRC has long been a country with a particular interest in shaping international discourse. Motivations for that lead back to its establishment in 1949 when the communist forces emerged victorious in the Chinese Civil War and the Kuomintang (KMT) government of the Republic of China (ROC) retreated to Taiwan. After that, claims to rightfully represent China in the world persisted on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. The PRC started from a position of very little international legitimacy in 1949 as most of the global community held on to relations with the ROC, recognizing it as representing China. The ROC then went on to represent China in the United Nations (UN) until 1971 when their positions ultimately switched. Since that time, the PRC has gradually gained global recognition as representing China, whilst the ROC developed into a democracy, today commonly known as Taiwan.

Today, the PRC's leadership sees narrative supremacy over Taiwan and

its space in the international community as paramount. As said in recent years by China's current Ambassador to Sweden, Cui Aimin, Taiwan can be considered "the core of China's core interests."³ The notion of Taiwan as a separate political entity is routinely refuted by the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through its "one China principle", Beijing maintains that there is only one China, that Taiwan is an inalienable part of its territory, and that the PRC is the only legitimate government representing China.⁴ The "Taiwan issue" originated as a threat to the PRC's legitimacy from the ROC, a threat that has dissipated in step with the PRC gaining global recognition. Over time the PRC's position has instead shifted from asserting its international legitimacy towards combatting perceived Taiwanese separatism and setting the stage for unification.⁵

The Chinese government's stern warnings against other states for engaging with Taiwan are well known in the international community. Other ways of affecting opinions are more commonplace and could even pass undetected. One such way of affecting public opinion that the Chinese government has used to strengthen its narrative control over the ROC and Taiwan is to employ diplomatic history in the PRC's favor. The history of diplomatic relations is often embedded in public discourse and used by public and private actors as a springboard for bilateral dialogue and economic cooperation. By emphasizing that countries have historically been eager to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC and have many bilateral achievements with it, the Chinese government has marginalized those countries' history with the ROC. By promoting its narrative of diplomatic history, the PRC argues that countries have always been on its side and should agree with it moving forward.

In Sweden, it is common knowledge that the country became the first in the West with formal diplomatic ties to the PRC in 1950. This history is rarely challenged or scrutinized and has been co-opted by both public and private actors across Sweden's political spectrum. However, this seemingly straightforward and streamlined narrative is significantly more complex than a first glance would suggest. Sweden was not the first in the West to recognize the PRC, but it ultimately became the first in the West

that established relations because it was picked by the PRC ahead of other countries to do so.⁶ Although Sweden's recognition of the PRC in 1950 can indeed be considered early, the Scandinavian country by no means attempted to be the first in the West with formal diplomatic relations. Instead, Sweden was cautious and attempted to strategically follow other countries, having them lead the way in recognition of the PRC.⁷

In 1950, as the Cold War took shape, the Swedish government under the Social Democratic Party pursued a policy of neutrality and non-alignment placing the country in between the two leading global powers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The Social Democratic Party ruled Sweden consecutively between 1932 and 1976 and its foreign policy during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s was built on the same foundation. But the government's approach, nevertheless, saw a significant shift in how this foundation was utilized over the decades. Sweden's approach to foreign policy and security policy in the 1950s was marked by caution and restraint.⁸ This careful approach would come to be contrasted by Sweden's foreign policy in the late 1960s and onwards when the Social Democratic government pursued an "activist" independent foreign policy that sought to have an international impact, even if that meant colliding with America, the leader of the Western bloc.⁹

The establishment of formal relations between Sweden and the PRC in 1950 has since been significant to both countries in their bilateral relations as a mutually beneficial diplomatic point of departure, having often been mentioned as their respective leaders met. On the international arena, however, this diplomatic history has played different roles for the two countries, as part of two different country-specific ideological narratives. Although Sweden did not try to become the first to have diplomatic relations to the PRC in 1950, that was ultimately the result of its early recognition. That Sweden became first has since retroactively been assumed into a cohesive foreign policy narrative under the Social Democratic Party, emphasizing Stockholm's historical legacy of acting independently in matters of foreign policy. Sweden's early diplomatic relations with the PRC has been held up alongside early recognition of

other states like North Vietnam and North Korea, instances where Sweden actually sought to be the first and led the way for others to follow.

For the PRC, relations with Sweden have also fit into a larger framework as Beijing's comprehensive use of history is a strategic tool with which it seeks to build an international consensus around its position. On an international arena where the PRC uses historical narratives to argue that there is a "right" and "wrong" side of history, it holds that Beijing's actions are righteous and in line with the "trend of history". That Sweden was the first in the West with diplomatic relations has been part of the PRC's comprehensive strategy where individual countries are small cogs in a large wheel. They are part of the PRC's efforts to bring the international community closer in line with Beijing's views and its strategic interests. At the core of Beijing's efforts to shape its narrative of history is its "one China principle" asserting that there is only one China; that the PRC represents all of China and that Taiwan is part of it.¹⁰ From Beijing's perspective, countries that the PRC has assigned a pioneering diplomatic status should agree with it and accordingly stand by its side on the "right side of history".

How Sweden and the PRC Established Relations

The Chinese Civil War was waged from 1927 to 1949. It was a revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) against the KMT which ruled the ROC on mainland Chinese territory. As the communist forces gained the upper hand in battle, the KMT government of the ROC retreated to Taiwan from which it maintained its claim to represent all of China. When the CCP gained control of mainland Chinese territory and established the PRC in 1949, the question for other countries emerged as to which regime they should diplomatically recognize. When the communist regime was established, the PRC started from a position of little international recognition as most countries already had pre-existing relations with the ROC which they held on to.

Sweden, like other countries, followed the leadup to the establishment of the PRC. As it became clear that the CCP was gaining decisive control of mainland Chinese territory, the question of potentially switching diplomatic recognition arose.¹¹ Recognizing the PRC theoretically meant that relations that had existed with mainland China could go on and be maintained with a new regime in place. This may seem like recognizing the PRC was an uncomplicated decision as soon as it became clear that the communists had gained stable control of China's territory as that was in line with international law, but this was not altogether the case. The Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and their respective Western and Eastern blocs had started which brought along other considerations. Being seen as acting against either of the blocs had to be contemplated carefully.

Sweden was ruled consecutively by its Social Democratic Party from 1936 to 1976 which gave it decisive control over the country's foreign policy following the Second World War. The party advocated for a policy

of neutrality and non-alignment, meaning neutrality in war and non-alignment in peace. Neutrality also corresponded to ideological Social Democratic notions about placing Sweden in between American capitalism and Soviet communism.¹² As the PRC was a communist regime, it was subject to ideological opposition from the U.S. led Western bloc. The U.S. set the norm for others to follow and officially supported the ROC in its claim of representing China, support that continued decades after the PRC was established on the mainland.

The state of affairs in 1950 meant that Sweden, pursuing a policy of neutrality and non-alignment, had some diplomatic room to maneuver between the Western and Eastern blocs. Therefore, when Sweden contemplated diplomatically switching recognition, the principal consideration was which regime had effective control of the China's territory. It was not an ideological decision in the sense that Sweden sought to act for or against either of the blocs, and recognizing the PRC was congruent with international law.¹³ In addition, Sweden also had economic interests on the Chinese mainland and the Swedish Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai pushed for recognition of the PRC at the earliest convenience for trade ties to seamlessly continue.¹⁴ Despite these factors, Sweden monitored how countries like the United Kingdom (UK) and the other Scandinavian countries were approaching the issue, coordinating Sweden's potential recognition to follow others rather than lead the way.¹⁵

The U.S. had been critical of Sweden not joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and was also critical when Stockholm considered recognizing the PRC instead of the ROC.¹⁶ Leading the way had meant for Sweden to bear the brunt of the burden in acting against the U.S. and the Western bloc and that was not ideal. Strategically placing itself behind other countries in order to not be the first in the West to recognize the PRC was a way for Stockholm to act in accordance with its motivations without being the cause of friction. A number of countries were then attempting to forge diplomatic relations by recognizing the PRC after its establishment in 1949, many of them both Western and ahead of Sweden.

In 1950, recognizing the PRC entailed sending a telegram, formally declaring recognition to the Chinese Foreign Ministry under Zhou Enlai. In 1949, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was the first country to recognize the PRC; it was followed by Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Burma and India.¹⁷ In January 1950, the list of countries that chose to recognize the PRC was joined by Pakistan, the United Kingdom, Ceylon, Norway, Denmark, Israel, Finland, Afghanistan and then Sweden.¹⁸ This is to say that although Sweden can still be considered to have been early when recognizing the PRC in 1950, it was not the first or even the first Western country to do so. In January 1950, the Swedish daily press reflected the sentiment that Sweden could have acted faster. The newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* noted on January 7, 1950, that Sweden had at that point been the last among its Nordic neighbors to recognize the PRC.¹⁹

Sweden sent its telegram recognizing the PRC on January 14, 1950.²⁰ During a session in the Swedish Parliament on January 17 that year, a representative of the Swedish Communist Party congratulated the Social Democratic government on recognizing the PRC. He implied that the government must have been reluctant to take the decision, referencing that Sweden had sold arms to the ROC that rivaled the communists in the Chinese Civil War.²¹ This exchange in parliament further supports the notion that Sweden's actions in 1950 were not domestically seen as Stockholm having taken a pioneering lead position in recognizing the PRC. It suggests that this was not a major event that could cause substantial political strife in Sweden as it was relatively cautious and balanced behavior, following the lead of others.

After Sweden's telegram of recognition, the matter was still not resolved. Under regular diplomatic praxis in 1950, sending a telegram declaring recognition would have been sufficient to also establish diplomatic relations as one state formally recognized the other. Other countries sending telegrams to the PRC were likely also prepared for that to be the case. However, Beijing required the establishment of diplomatic relations to be negotiated bilaterally. In this way, the Chinese government

demanded to “recognize the recognition” first before relations could practically commence.²²

In the PRC’s process of recognizing recognitions, it appeared to the Swedish side that it was being moved up the order among the countries that got to establish relations. From Beijing, Sweden’s selected ambassador to the PRC, Torsten Hammarström, reported to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Stockholm noting that it did not seem ideal that he would become the first European representative to deliver his letter of credence to the Chinese side.²³ This outcome was after all not what Stockholm had aimed for and the consequences of invertedly taking on a Western lead position could be seen as diverging from Stockholm’s measured and cautious approach.

Formal and mutual diplomatic relations were deemed by Beijing to have commenced on May 9, 1950, as the two countries announced the exchange of Ambassadors.²⁴ The history of ties between the two and its use by both Sweden and China has shifted focus onto the establishment of relations rather than when Sweden recognized the PRC because then Sweden would not have been first in the West. What is clear is that Sweden did not attempt to be the first in the West; it was the result of the PRC’s response to being recognized. Instead, Stockholm’s behavior was measured and cautious in line with its overall approach to foreign policy in the 1950s. It was mindful of how it would be perceived by other countries in the global balance of power rather than seeking to make a pioneering, grand statement in opposition to the Western bloc. Although Sweden ultimately became the first in the West with diplomatic relations to the PRC, its actions were not those of a pioneer and its ambition was not to lead the way for others to follow.

The PRC Chose Sweden

In China, the occasion of Sweden and the PRC establishing relations was marked by a ceremony as Sweden's Ambassador Torsten Hammarström delivered his letter of credence directly to Chairman Mao Zedong on June 12, 1950.²⁵ That existing relations with the ROC had been a decisive factor in which country was accepted to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC is beyond a doubt. This consideration was explicitly mentioned in PRC Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai's reply to Sweden's telegram of recognition.²⁶ As the Chinese side negotiated the establishment of diplomatic relations with Sweden, it sought assurances that ties with the ROC had been severed in a manner satisfactory to the PRC.²⁷ Beijing was adamant that relations with the ROC had to be severed before diplomatic relations could be established with the PRC as this was, and still is, a binary choice for nations to make.

In 1950, Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT regime in Taiwan maintained that it was the legitimate ruler of China as the ROC. Competing claims across the Taiwan Strait from both Beijing and Taipei regarding which regime was legitimate persisted throughout the following decades. The adoption of UN resolution 2758 in 1971 changed the situation as the PRC was granted the seat of China in the United Nations (UN).²⁸ Since then, such claims have gradually faded on the side of Taiwan as it has developed into a democracy. The so-called "1992 consensus" that saw Beijing and Taipei agree to an extent that there is only "one China", albeit with both sides reserving the right to define precisely what that means, is contested between Taiwan's political parties. Beijing on the other hand steadily maintains through its "one China principle" that the PRC represents China in the world, and that Taiwan is part of it.

Ahead of sending its telegram of recognition to Beijing in 1950, the Swedish government informed the ROC's ambassador in Stockholm that Sweden

was likely to follow other countries and switch diplomatic recognition to the PRC.²⁹ Although Sweden did not intend to be the first country in the West with diplomatic relations to the PRC, the process of severing ties with the ROC was already underway when Sweden sent its telegram of recognition. It was prepared in a way that other countries were not.

Why the PRC seemingly chose Sweden over other countries remains an underexplored research topic, but in retrospect there were several factors making the Scandinavian country a relatively uncomplicated choice for the PRC. Sweden could give a firm and credible response that formal relations with the ROC had been severed and dealt with in a way that was satisfactory to the PRC.³⁰ The UK, which led the way for Western countries' recognition had substantial economic interests in China and had also been war time allies with the ROC, making complete severance of ties a more complicated matter.³¹ Hong Kong's position as a British Crown Colony also further complicated the UK's proposition to smoothly establish relations with the PRC and the Chinese leadership had reason to doubt that the UK would support it over the ROC in the UN.³²

The UK along with other early recognizers such as Denmark and Norway were also founding members of NATO, positioned against the Soviet Union and by extension the Eastern bloc.³³ Since Sweden had declined to join the alliance, it had a degree of credibility as a neutral country in a world divided between East and West. As such, Beijing could have some confidence that Stockholm would not be swayed against it by the Western bloc and that it would support the PRC as representing China in the UN when relations commenced. When Sweden ultimately joined NATO in 2024, China's ambassador to Sweden, Cui Aimin, noted that Stockholm's shift was likely to impact bilateral relations.³⁴ The notion of Sweden as a neutral country had likely been of some significance to Beijing for many years.

The PRC's choice not to accept other countries' recognition at face value suggests that it evaluated the candidates with consideration. Given that the PRC faced a rival claim in representing China, the question was if

the recognizing countries were driven by their own self-interest or if they could be trusted to side with Beijing; the countries were choosing the PRC over the ROC and would follow through on their choice with commitment also in the UN, likely factored in the PRC's deliberation. It was more important for the PRC to be recognized on its own terms than to accept diplomatic relations with a country that would not respect or support its position against the ROC in Taiwan. In other words, diplomatic relations were bestowed upon those that the PRC believed would respect and support its claim as the legitimate representative of China.

Ultimately, the decision to have Sweden establish diplomatic relations before other countries was a process that the PRC had control over, and the Swedish government was prepared to meet the Chinese government's demands. Sweden could reassure the PRC that ties with the ROC had been severed and that it would support the PRC for China's seat in the UN. The perception of Sweden as a neutral country likely lent further credibility to its words. This is to say that once other countries had shouldered the initial burden of leading the way in recognizing the communist Chinese regime, Sweden emerged as one of the PRC's more viable options when it came time to negotiate the establishment of relations. As diplomatic relations between the PRC and Sweden commenced, Stockholm followed through on its commitment by maintaining that the mainland communist regime should represent China in the UN until that became a reality in 1971.³⁵

The Influence of Sweden's Independent Foreign Policy Era

Sweden thus became the first country in the West to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC though other states that are now considered Western came before it. This can also be explained by the dynamics of the Cold War. Countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia (today the Czech Republic and Slovakia) for example, seen as part of the West or Eastern Europe, were in the context of the Cold War seen as part of the Eastern bloc. This underlying distinction allowed for countries that established relations with the PRC during the Cold War to be categorically separated into "Eastern bloc", "Western bloc", "communist" or "non-communist". It qualified Sweden as a Western country while others were not considered to be so.

That Sweden was the first in the West to establish relations with the PRC is often conflated with Sweden also having been the first to recognize it, resulting in a common belief that there was pioneering intent behind the government's actions in 1950. But this conflation can also be explained by the relevance and enduring influence of Sweden's so-called "activist" foreign policy era during the 1960s and 1970s. Sweden's foreign policy shifted in the 1960s from the relatively cautious approach that can be observed when the PRC was recognized in 1950 towards a more idealistic and "activist" role in international affairs where Sweden aimed to take the lead. During the late 1960s and 1970s, Sweden under Social Democratic leadership used its policy of neutrality and non-alignment to increasingly take an independent stance in international affairs, striving to have a global impact. As part of this shift, Stockholm would for example often side with the so called "Third World" in the UN rather than with the dominating powers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union.³⁶

At the time of the U.S. war in Vietnam, Sweden and the Social Democratic

government acted with clear intent, at odds with the U.S. and its War, when it was the first to establish diplomatic relations with North Vietnam in 1969.³⁷ Recognizing North Vietnam then set an influential precedent for Swedish foreign policy as Sweden assumed a prominent lead position. When Stockholm also recognized the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1973, the *New York Times* published an article reading that "Sweden today became the first non-Communist European country to recognize North Korea. She called on other nations to follow suit."³⁸ This description of Stockholm's actions in 1973 bears a close resemblance to how Sweden's establishment of relations with the PRC are also seen today. On the Swedish government's webpages about relations with China, Vietnam and North Korea, Sweden's first in the West with diplomatic relations is mentioned in similar terms.³⁹

A more contemporary example of Sweden's independent foreign policy under the Social Democratic Party's leadership was the establishment of diplomatic relations with Palestine in 2014. At that time, Sweden became the first EU member in Western Europe to recognize Palestine and Foreign Minister Margot Wallström stated: "We hope that this will show the way for others".⁴⁰ This pattern of Sweden under the Social Democratic Party, diplomatically leading the way for others to follow, cannot be discerned when relations with the PRC were established in 1950 because Sweden's shift from caution to "activism" had not yet happened. By traversing through an era where Sweden strove to be the first with diplomatic recognition as a diplomatic pioneer of the West, early relations with the PRC became part of a larger pattern.

Sweden took an independent and pioneering diplomatic lead position regarding both North Vietnam and North Korea during Sweden's "activist" foreign policy era which for many is strongly associated with Prime Minister Olof Palme of the Social Democratic Party.⁴¹ Collective historical memory of Prime Minister Palme openly criticizing the U.S. for its war in Vietnam has had a lasting impact in Sweden. It is linked to contemporary notions of Sweden's independence in matters of foreign policy.⁴² This is to say that the outsized influence of this era and its

enduring legacy can be considered a lens through which both former and later diplomatic recognitions under Sweden's Social Democratic Party have come to be seen.

Sweden's international "activism" became subject to a sharp divide between the ruling center left Social Democratic Party and its right-wing opposition. During a session in Swedish Parliament in 1969, the Social Democratic Minister for Foreign Affairs, Torsten Nilsson, was questioned about the government's decision to recognize North Vietnam. Nilsson downplayed the decision, facing criticism from the conservative opposition for having taken a provocative stand against the U.S., causing friction with the leading power of the Western bloc. During the session, Nilsson stated that Sweden had also been among the first countries to recognize the PRC and that it had historically been the first to recognize a number of countries.⁴³ He also argued that the conservative opposition put far too great of an emphasis on the early recognition of the PRC which he stated, to his recollection, came after that of the UK.⁴⁴

This parliamentary exchange from 1969 exemplifies how Sweden establishing relations with the PRC retroactively became part of a sharpening domestic divide about Sweden's role in international affairs, almost 20 years after relations with the PRC had been established. The Social Democratic government held early relations with the PRC up alongside recognition of other states, arguing that Sweden had always been a diplomatic pioneer of sorts. The opposition on their part, conflated what establishing relations with the PRC had meant in 1950 with what recognition of North Vietnam meant in 1969. In this sense, having recognized the PRC in 1950 became part of what the opposition in 1969 saw as anti-American behavior.

The Social Democratic government had left the caution of the 1950s behind in favor of an "activist" 1960s approach that did not shy away from both assuming a lead position and taking a stand against the U.S. The right-wing opposition disagreed with the government's chosen path out of concern for relations with America. Sweden's diplomatic relations with the U.S.

deteriorated during this era and eventually came to a complete freezing halt.⁴⁵ Although Sweden's foreign policy and the function of its policy of neutrality had been up for debate before, in the 1960s it became subject to a sharpening divide about which international role Stockholm should play. In this context, the establishment of relations with North Vietnam can be considered a turning point, explaining how the establishment of diplomatic relations with other states under the Social Democratic Party would also come to be seen in light of this significant event when Sweden diplomatically led the way for others to follow.

In 1969, Social Democratic Foreign Minister Torsten Nilsson noted that Sweden had in fact not been the first to recognize the PRC. His remarks in Swedish parliament and records from Swedish media in the 1950s stand in contrast to statements made by contemporary politicians. For example, the former Social Democratic Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde published on her Facebook page in 2018 that Sweden had been the first of all countries that established diplomatic relations with China in May 1950.⁴⁶ Furthermore, during a session in Swedish Parliament in 2019 when Sweden's trade with China was being discussed, a representative for the Moderate Party stated that since Sweden had been the first in the West with relations, it ought to be in a particularly favorable position to trade with the PRC.⁴⁷ These examples show how the view of Sweden forming diplomatic relations with the PRC has undergone a substantial transformation from the 1950s. The view has gradually shifted towards a narrative that Sweden acted with pioneering intent when it recognized the PRC. It has become another example of when Sweden, under the Social Democratic Party, diplomatically led the way for others to follow. Even if that was not actually the case with the PRC.

By traversing through the 1960s and 1970s influential era of Swedish foreign policy when Sweden recognized regimes isolated from the West and was the first to do so, relations with the PRC became part of the larger narrative. The opposition, mindful of not causing a rift with the U.S., held the Social Democratic government's recognition of North Vietnam in 1969 and the PRC in 1950 under the same lens. The Social Democratic

government, on its part, brought forth a narrative that Sweden had often been a diplomatic pioneer. Since then, the contemporary view of Sweden's recognition of the PRC has conformed around an overarching view that Sweden acted as a diplomatic pioneer, with a history of leading the way for others to follow. Although Sweden's actions in 1950 were not actually those of a pioneer, they have come to be seen as part of a larger pattern of pioneering behavior that altogether hold up the historic legacy of Sweden's independent foreign policy.

How the PRC Uses History

The use of history plays a particularly important domestic role for the CCP. China's authoritarian system allows for the state to have substantial control over the country's official historical narrative through which it can minimize critical views of its leadership. By controlling China's history and bringing the history of the Chinese civilization and the CCP into one cohesive whole, the party can secure its future by controlling how its past is viewed. In this way, history is one of many tools that the CCP can use to further strengthen its legitimacy.⁴⁸

Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has increased an overall emphasis on greater national security, which is a lens through which much of its current international behavior can be understood.⁴⁹ This securitization also extends to the international arena where the Chinese government works to defend and further its strategic interests. The PRC's strategic interests and its use of history are interlinked because by bringing other countries closer in line with the CCP's view of history, it can also bring them further in line with its strategic interests. By creating a favorable international setting with its narratives, the CCP can mind its security interests and pursue its strategic objectives with less opposition. In its approach to history as a strategic tool, the CCP does not only view it as a framework to control how the past is viewed but also as a tool to shape the future, often referring to the "trend of history", meaning how history should unfold.⁵⁰

Xi Jinping and the CCP have in recent years embarked on advancing a framework for contemporary international issues through its Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). The initiative links contemporary international relations with the CCP's view of history.⁵¹ Speaking on the GCI at the webinar "A Call for a Global Civilization Initiative", China's Ambassador to Sweden, Cui Aimin, stated that "the Chinese civilization is the only great civilization in the world that has not been interrupted

and has continued to this day. Through having traversed more than 5,000 years of history, it has always been in continuity and is prominently consistent.”⁵² These 5,000 years of “continuity” and “consistency” provide the CCP, which came into power in 1949, with a wealth of historical material to draw on and position itself in contemporary foreign policy issues. The GCI brings forth not only that countries’ sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected but also that their “core interests and major concerns” should be respected.⁵³ For the PRC, this means that the international community should respect the core of its core interests in Taiwan and the claim that it is part of China.

History or historical framing is frequently used by the PRC to underpin arguments in official communication and diplomatic efforts. The Chinese government often seeks to frame its foreign policy in terms of being historically rooted, relevant or accurate. This was the case when a historical perspective was applied to the PRC’s claims in the South China Sea. The PRC made a claim of historical rights with its so-called “nine dash line” noting in a position paper that the arbitration case that was initiated by the Philippines “will not change the history and fact of China’s sovereignty over the South China Sea Islands and the adjacent waters”.⁵⁴ Here, history was invoked to legitimize the PRC’s territorial claim in the face of objection.

At the core of the CCP’s view of history lies its issue with the ROC and Taiwan. Beijing’s view of how the situation with Taiwan should unfold was on clear display at the 40th anniversary of the PRC’s “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan”. In his message, Xi Jinping asserted that: “Cross-Strait reunification is the trend of history. ‘Taiwan independence’ goes against the trend of history and will lead to a dead end.”⁵⁵ Another example of Beijing’s “trend of history” was presented when Italy debated leaving its commitment to the PRC’s large infrastructure project the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Here history was invoked by the CCP when the Chinese foreign ministry stated that criticism of BRI-cooperation between China and Italy had been designed to sow division and “goes against the trend of history”.⁵⁶ The “trend of history” in these examples strongly correlates with

the PRC's strategic interests in seeking unification with Taiwan and making its strategic BRI project a success. In this way, the "trend of history" is not a historical observation as much as how Beijing wants history to unfold.

China's Mission to the EU published an article in 2022 with answers to questions about Beijing's "one China principle" asserting that "Taiwan has belonged to China since ancient times" and that "181 countries including most European countries, have established diplomatic relations with China on the basis of the one-China principle."⁵⁷ Although all countries that established diplomatic relations with the PRC in turn severed official ties with the ROC and commonly maintain a "one China" policy, it does not mean that they have automatically aligned with Beijing's "one China principle". The "one China principle" is Beijing's position. Individual countries' "one China" policies vary in their approach to the PRC's claim over Taiwan where some align more closely with Beijing's principle and others do not.⁵⁸ According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry article, countries aligned with Beijing's "one China principle" when they established relations with the PRC. In this example, Beijing conflates diplomatic history with alignment and support for its "one China principle" portraying it as an international consensus when positions among individual countries vary.

Regarding Taiwan and the ROC's international participation, the Chinese government has attempted to link UN resolution 2758 from 1971 with its "one China principle". Although the resolution dealt with whether it was the PRC or the ROC that should represent China in the UN system, the Chinese government has held it up as historical evidence of support for its "one China principle" and that Taiwan belongs to China. The PRC's use of history with resolution 2758 has received criticism, labeled as a "misinterpretation" by an accepted European parliament resolution.⁵⁹ As the Taiwanese government has mounted campaigns for participation in the UN's World Health Assembly (WHA), the Chinese government has been in firm opposition arguing that there is an international consensus against it and that the "one-China principle is where global opinion trends and the arc of history bends".⁶⁰

In recent times, the PRC has received criticism for effectively supporting Russia's War in Ukraine, helping it to circumvent international sanctions.⁶¹ When China's Ambassador to the UK was discussing the PRC's position on Russia's war in Ukraine, he argued that "China has always been a force for justice and peace and has always stood on the right side of history."⁶² Here, history was invoked to assign righteous morality to the PRC despite it being criticized for immoral behavior. The "right side" of history as Beijing uses it effectively means how the PRC maneuvers on the international arena, even if it is criticized. Being on the right side of history for other countries in this regard means agreeing and aligning with the PRC. As the Chinese ambassador to Sweden, Cui Aimin, concluded his remarks at the aforementioned webinar about the GCI, he also stated that China welcomes Sweden to "firmly stand on the right side of history".⁶³

From these examples we see how the use of history emerges as a prominent avenue through which the PRC works to shape international views in its favor. It is an avenue through which it attempts to create a conducive environment for its strategic pursuits. The implication throughout the Chinese government's use of historical framing is that international affairs is an arena where actors can find themselves on the "wrong side of history" or going against the "trend of history" through their actions. As these examples have shown, actions are routinely deemed wrongful by the PRC when they do not align with its strategic interests whereas the PRC is always on the "right side of history" through its actions. For the Chinese government, history is not only something that explains the past or separates right from wrong, but also a tool to shape both the discourse and the outcome. In its efforts to use history to bring the international community closer in line with its views, the "trend of history" is Beijing's rhetorical tool to create a favorable environment for what it wants to see happen.

The PRC's Many Diplomatic "Firsts"

Driven by its strategic interests in shaping international views in its favor, many of the Chinese government's attempts to influence opinions today can be traced back to its issues with the ROC and Taiwan, the core of Beijing's core interests. The ROC in Taiwan is a reminder of a time when the PRC was not widely recognized as representing China internationally and since it democratized, it has also presented the Chinese speaking world with an alternative to the CCP's authoritarian rule. As the PRC gradually gained the upper hand in international recognition over the ROC, its rhetorical focus has increasingly shifted from defending its legitimacy towards asserting Beijing's view that Taiwan is a break-away province that needs to be unified with China. Today, the PRC's efforts can be understood in a context where the Chinese government works actively in attempting to shape international views and the global narrative about the ROC and Taiwan.⁶⁴

Establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC has always been a binary choice for countries to make, which stands in contrast to the establishment of relations with North Korea and North Vietnam, mentioned earlier in this paper. Sweden establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea did not entail severing ties with South Korea which was also not the case regarding North Vietnam. To this day, however, countries cannot simultaneously maintain official diplomatic relations with both the PRC and the ROC. This means that for all intents and purposes recognizing the PRC was a choice and promoting its history inevitably highlights a choice between the PRC and the ROC. When the Chinese government uses the history of Western countries having been eager to recognize it, the implication is that there were "Western" and "non-communist" countries that were motivated to choose the PRC despite the U.S. and other countries standing by the ROC. In phrasing used by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such a country was a "pioneer".⁶⁵

That Western countries were pioneers in recognizing the PRC is a perspective that the CCP has had great strategic interest in promoting because it serves to marginalize those countries' former bilateral history with the ROC. It is also a way to remind countries which the PRC thinks is conducive to its strategic aims that they have since long made a commitment towards China. In Beijing's view, countries that were pioneers in establishing relations with the PRC made a choice to stand by its side and respect its claims long ago. In turn, it also makes those countries an example for the international community to follow. By considering that influential Western countries have supposedly been eager to side with the PRC, other countries may possibly reconsider their potential apprehension to Beijing's diplomatic overtures. Elevating diplomatic history by framing other countries as pioneers is, in this sense, also a tool for the PRC to shape the international environment and create a favorable international environment and strengthen its "one China principle". Highlighting that countries have supposedly been diplomatic pioneers towards the PRC is an approach its government has often used.

According to a *Xinhua* article from 2007, former PRC President Hu Jintao, while on a state visit to Sweden, said that it had been the "first Western country to recognize" the PRC and that bilateral ties had steadily progressed ever since.⁶⁶ Furthermore, when Sweden's former Prime Minister Stefan Löfven and the PRC's Premier Li Keqiang met in 2015, the Chinese side also emphasized that Sweden had been the first in the West to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC.⁶⁷ Sweden is, however, not the only country that the Chinese government has at some point designated as a diplomatic pioneer of the West. To the contrary, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has willfully attributed pioneering status to a number of countries.

On the website of the Chinese Embassy in the UK, an overview of the two countries' relations published in 2010 begins with asserting that "The United Kingdom recognized the People's Republic of China in 1950 and was the first major Western country to do so", although it was also noted in the article that it took until 1972 to formally establish diplomatic relations.⁶⁸ When President Xi Jinping visited the British Parliament

in 2015, he also mentioned that the UK was the “first Western power” that officially recognized the PRC and that the two countries had since achieved many “firsts”.⁶⁹ In actuality, the UK was not able to establish relations following its early recognition, likely because of its pre-existing relations with the ROC and the British Crown Colony Hong Kong, as discussed earlier in this paper.

Even though it took for France until 1964 to sever diplomatic ties with the ROC and instead establish them with the PRC, it can nevertheless be read on the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s website that France at that time became the “first major Western country to enter into diplomatic relations and establish full partnership with China.”⁷⁰ In an article from state owned news media *Global Times* from 2024, France was described as having been “not only on the right side of history, but at the forefront of history” for having made the decision, echoing the Chinese government’s language.⁷¹ Holding France up as a pioneer in these examples is a way to shape the view of relations as favorable to the PRC, signaling that France was historically eager to stand by China’s side. This despite the fact that an argument to the contrary can be made as France was not part of the countries that were early to recognize the PRC.

Although establishing relations between the PRC, UK and France was a difficult process, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has in these articles flexibly assigned and emphasized a similar pioneering status to both of them. In this way, putting a positive spin on what was complicated negotiations where the two European countries for long were not accommodating the PRC’s demands. They are differentiated from smaller countries like Sweden by being described as major, which is how they can be assigned pioneering status despite the fact that the UK and France established diplomatic relations with the PRC 22 and 14 years later than Sweden, respectively. This is because from the PRC’s perspective, the trouble in establishing relations with these countries is not what matters. What has been significant to the PRC, regardless of how history unfolded, is portraying countries that it deems conducive to its strategic aims as having historically been on China’s side.

In 2021, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs published an article about a phone call between China's now highest-ranking diplomat, Wang Yi, and the Foreign Minister of the Swiss Confederation, Ignazio Cassis. The article described bilateral relations between the two countries in favorable terms and emphasized mutual respect.⁷² In addition, the article contains a quote by Wang Yi having mentioned that "Switzerland is the first Western country to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with New China" and that the relationship in this regard contains one of "many firsts".⁷³ The same framing of historically favorable Sino-Swiss relations could also be observed in a *China Daily* article by the PRC's ambassador to Switzerland from 2020 called "A relationship of many firsts" which similarly expounds on how Switzerland was the first western country that recognized China.⁷⁴ In reality, Switzerland sent its telegram of recognition on January 17, after Sweden, and was attempting to avoid being "either one of the first or the last" to establish relations.⁷⁵ Switzerland was trailing behind Sweden, both in terms of recognizing the PRC and establishing relations with it. What is also noteworthy, is that this diplomatic push towards Switzerland in the early 2020s correlates with when the PRC and Sweden were having bilateral friction.

Sweden and the PRC experienced a period of notable friction during the tenure of Chinese Ambassador Gui Congyou (2017-2022). During his five-year tenure, he was summoned for talks at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs upwards of 40 times.⁷⁶ Sweden had consistently objected to the imprisonment of Gui Minhai, an overseas Swedish citizen and book publisher living abroad in Hong Kong, who was jailed in China.⁷⁷ From the PRC's perspective, Gui was a criminal who had leaked information to foreign powers.⁷⁸ It remains an issue of significant contention. Meanwhile, Chinese state media had criticized Sweden in its treatment of Chinese tourists who had arrived early at their hotel in Stockholm; they were ousted and escorted away by police officers.⁷⁹ In 2018, Swedish state-owned television channel SVT had also received criticism for airing a satirical TV-show that mocked Chinese tourists.⁸⁰ China's Ambassador Gui Congyou wrote a debate article published in *Dagens Industri* in 2019, that took a critical stance against

Sweden's inability to prevent an alleged crime wave against Chinese tourists.⁸¹

In 2019, Sweden's Social Democratic Minister for Science and Education, Matilda Ernkrans, met with Taiwan's Minister of Science and Technology, Chen Liang-Gee.⁸² Such ministerial meetings are generally considered a red line by the PRC as it fundamentally disapproves of any kind of engagement with the Taiwanese government, especially by ruling governments. In addition, the Swedish Post and Telecom Authority (PTS) decided against Chinese telecommunications company Huawei taking part in building Sweden's 5G infrastructure, citing national security concerns from Sweden's Security Service.⁸³ These developments altogether and the friction between the two sides are not what the PRC expects from a country that has supposedly been a Western diplomatic pioneer towards it, impacting the PRC's assessment of Sweden as conducive to its strategic aims. Sweden was not behaving as if it was unequivocally on China's side; it was behaving independently.

The above examples show that the Chinese Foreign Ministry has willfully and flexibly applied pioneering diplomatic status to several different countries at various points in time. Historical accuracy, or which country was actually the first in the West to forge diplomatic ties emerges in these examples as secondary. The primary objective is instead perpetuating a narrative that a country deemed conducive to the PRC's strategic aims has historically been eager to side with China and achieve bilateral "firsts" with it. Although, this does not necessarily negate the notion that the Chinese government has valued relations with the above-mentioned countries, it does unveil an apparent strategy of flexibly using diplomatic history with other countries in the PRC's favor. The Chinese government is, in this regard, not bound by the confines of history in these examples. Instead, historical accuracy is superseded by the utility historical narratives have in shaping favorable international views.

Elevating diplomatic history on a bilateral level and assigning countries status as pioneers sends the message that they were historically eager to

choose the PRC and stand by its side, even if that was not necessarily the case. Historical accuracy is secondary to an aim of flexibly using historical narratives to imply that a country agreed with the PRC in the past and should continue to agree with it and respect its position moving forward. In this way, flexibly using diplomatic history is another tool for the PRC to bring a given country closer in line with Beijing's views and its strategic interests. If a country ultimately disagrees with the Chinese government, or is deemed not conducive to its aims, another country can take its place as having been a diplomatic pioneer. This case was made clear when the PRC made a diplomatic push towards Switzerland during times of friction with Sweden. As friction with Sweden mounted, the Chinese government stated that Switzerland had been the first in the West with diplomatic relations, despite earlier having emphasized the same history with Sweden.

Conclusion

Sweden was not the first in the West that recognized the PRC, but it ultimately became the first in the West to establish diplomatic relations with the communist regime. For Sweden, establishing relations with the PRC was a decision based on several factors. When the communist regime gained effective control of the Chinese mainland, it emerged as Sweden's choice because it was congruent with international law. Stockholm also had motivation to protect and ensure the continuation of trade relations with China.

Sweden's recognition was only idealistically motivated insofar as that the early recognition of the PRC broadly corresponded to the ruling Social Democratic Party's vision of placing Sweden in between U.S. capitalism and Soviet communism. It was not idealistically motivated in the sense that Sweden sought to make a grand statement by recognizing the PRC, standing against the U.S. and the Western bloc. To the contrary, Sweden sought to strike a careful balance by letting other Western countries lead the way in recognition and bear the brunt of the burden after which Sweden could also reap the benefits that early relations entailed. The UK, Denmark and Norway, ahead of Sweden in recognition of the PRC were aligned with NATO. As such, emphasizing Sweden's neutrality was not a gain that could be made. Sweden was in other words, not a pioneer when it recognized the PRC as it later became when it established relations with North Vietnam and North Korea.

Sweden was, however, picked over other countries to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC. Though other Western countries had led the way, Sweden emerged a convenient choice for the PRC. Stockholm could assure the PRC that it had severed ties with the ROC in a manner that was acceptable to Chinese leaders. The Chinese government could also have confidence that Sweden, having chosen to stay outside of the NATO

alliance, could stand by its decision despite pressure from the Western bloc. Sweden was in a position to support the PRC as representing China in the UN, which is also what it consequently did. From China's perspective, when Sweden and the PRC established diplomatic relations, it meant that Stockholm was siding with the PRC in its claim of representing China on the international arena regardless of the U.S. and the Western bloc disagreeing with this choice.

For Sweden, establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1950 was not particularly controversial domestically because it was a measured and cautious behavior following the lead of others and it served trade interests. Twenty years later, Sweden's Social Democratic government started to use its foundational policy of neutrality and non-alignment to take an increasingly independent stance in foreign policy matters. It abandoned its former caution and became willing to bear the brunt of the burden against the U.S. The government took a hard stand against the U.S. when it was the first in the West that recognized North Vietnam in 1969 and relations with the U.S. deteriorated. In terms of diplomatic recognitions, this event became a symbol of the Social Democratic Party's "activist" foreign policy era, where Sweden departed from caution in favor of having an international impact.

Diplomatic recognition of North Vietnam caused a domestic debate about which role Sweden should play in international affairs and the government's approach was criticized by the opposition for provoking the U.S. Although recognition of the PRC had been done with caution in 1950, the debate of the 1960s brought relations with China into a political divide about Sweden's "activist" foreign policy. It became part of a larger pattern. Since then, Sweden's establishment of relations with the PRC has gradually conformed around a narrative of Sweden as a diplomatic pioneer under the Social Democratic Party's independent foreign policy. It is seen retrospectively as one of the many times Stockholm moved to be the first in the West with diplomatic relations. This narrative has in turn opened the door for a view that Sweden was a pioneer when establishing relations with the PRC in 1950, even if that was not the case.

As Sweden's establishment of relations with the PRC came to be seen through a different lens, alongside its recognition of other states during its "activist" foreign policy era, a different shift occurred in the PRC. Over time, the international community gradually came to support its position as representing China. In the meantime, the ROC in Taiwan democratized and claims from the ROC to represent all of China faded from its formerly held firm position. The PRC's position in turn shifted from arguing that it was the rightful representative of China towards increasingly emphasizing that Taiwan is part of its territory, a break-away province with separatists to be unified with the mainland. From its increasingly strong position, Beijing's use of history on the international arena has conformed around a strategy of building global consensus around its position with its "one China principle" at the core. It is part of Beijing's efforts to marginalize engagement with Taiwan. Use of historical narratives is a way for Beijing to create a conducive international environment for its strategic pursuits by arguing that its behavior is on the "right side of history", or in line with the "trend of history".

In its efforts to control the narrative about Taiwan and the ROC, Beijing's "one China principle" is the cornerstone. It is also inseparably linked to the PRC's comprehensive use of history in the international arena complementing its view of right and wrong. Its arguments that there is a "right" and "wrong" side of history as well as a "trend of history" have seemingly been designed to support the PRC's efforts in controlling the narrative about Taiwan and the ROC. From Beijing's perspective, supporting Taiwan is the "wrong" side of history and unification with it is the "trend of history". In this context, use of history is a way for the PRC to control how the past is viewed and steer the future in a direction that is conducive to its strategic goal of unification. If the international community collectively accepts Beijing's narrative and that unification is the "trend of history", it can theoretically be undertaken without global opposition.

For most countries, Sweden included, establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC meant respecting its claim to represent China and maintain a

“one China” policy by not having official relations with the ROC in Taiwan. Sweden has since maintained a “one China” policy. But for Beijing, it is not just about maintaining a “one China” policy. The PRC’s flexible use of how countries have been diplomatic pioneers in recognizing it, eager to achieve many bilateral “firsts”, is part of a comprehensive strategy of using history to its advantage. It is a way for Beijing to draw countries closer to its views and argue that they have always agreed with it and should continue to do so moving forward. The PRC’s use of how Sweden was the first in the West with diplomatic relations fits in this larger context where history and historical framing has been used by Beijing as a tool to build an international consensus around its position. Which country was the first to establish relations with the PRC matters less as historical accuracy is secondary to Beijing’s strategic goals when flexibly applying diplomatic history. No one country is an “old friend” of the PRC, instead many countries have simultaneously been diplomatic pioneers towards it when it suits China’s interests. Beijing can at any given moment in time emphasize the one country that is the most conducive to its overarching strategy of building an international consensus around its position.

The use of diplomatic history is part of Beijing’s comprehensive strategy of getting the international community to agree with the PRC. On a bilateral level, mutual elevation of diplomatic history with the PRC may create mismatched expectations when a country does not agree with all of the PRC’s behavior, claims or arguments. This paper has outlined separate and country-specific contexts for why Sweden and the PRC have elevated their mutual diplomatic history. For Beijing, emphasizing that Sweden was the first in the West with diplomatic relations to the PRC has meant that Stockholm should respect its interests and agree with its position, standing firmly with Beijing on the “right side of history”. In turn, this would send a signal to other countries that Sweden has historically agreed with the PRC and continues to stand by its side.

For Sweden, that it became the first in the West with diplomatic relations to the PRC has instead corresponded to a narrative about the country’s independent foreign policy, associated primarily with the Social

Democratic Party. That Sweden was the first in the West with diplomatic relations to the PRC has been useful in this regard as it became part of an overarching assertion of the country's unique foreign policy identity on the international arena. It has played a larger role for Sweden and the Social Democratic party, emphasizing its legacy of being an independent and neutral foreign policy actor. It has not meant that Sweden would always agree with China.

Although Sweden clearly seeks to maintain a "one China" policy, the relationship with the PRC has naturally meant both agreement and disagreement. There have been mutual areas of potential cooperation as well as others where the national interest is to be minded and protected. The Social Democratic government that ruled Sweden between 2014 and 2022 found itself on the receiving end of the PRC's assertive diplomacy as the PRC sought to advance its interests and secure its position in a new era. The findings of this paper suggest that a mutual elevation of diplomatic history, based in separate country-specific narratives, may have contributed to mismatched expectations between the two sides. For the PRC and its ambassador in Stockholm, a longtime mutual elevation of diplomatic history meant that Sweden should have been eager to agree with and accommodate the PRC, reaping the benefits of being on Beijing's good side. But for the Social Democratic government, having been the first in the West with relations to the PRC instead corresponded to a broader vision and a narrative about Sweden's international role. A narrative related to the historical legacy of an independent foreign policy when Stockholm took the lead for others to follow in a divided world. The PRC expected Sweden to fold and agree as friction mounted between the two sides. But for Sweden and the Social Democratic Party, its independent foreign policy legacy never meant that it would fold; it meant that Sweden has had a history of standing up.

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About the Author

Agust Börjesson is Acting Head of the Stockholm Taiwan Center and a Research Fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy's Asia Program. He holds a bachelor's degree in Chinese language and a master's degree in Asian Studies from Lund University in Sweden. He has also studied Chinese language at Beijing Foreign Studies University as well as international relations at Tsinghua University in China. His area of interest is foreign policy and security issues related to East Asia, with a particular focus on China and Taiwan. Current research interests include Sweden's relations with Taiwan and China, cross-strait relations, competing international narratives and the use of history in international relations.

