

# Shared Histories, Distinct Memories

A comparison of Chinese and Russian official media discourses on World War II



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# Executive summary

## Context

Eighty years ago on this day, the United States, United Kingdom, Soviet Union and Republic of China issued the Four Power Declaration. In this historic joint message amid the turmoil of global war, the four major Allies of World War II pledged to join hands toward the establishment of a post-war international organisation for peace: the United Nations.

Eight decades on, the official memory of World War II has become a battlefield of its own, with the four one-time allies today split across two contending camps. As geopolitical tensions continue to rise, there are strong indications that Moscow and Beijing have sought to align their historical narratives – particularly those on World War II and its lessons – to support their professed “no limits” friendship.

Using quantitative, qualitative and comparative analysis on a trilingual dataset comprising over 14,000 Russian and Chinese news articles published over the last two decades, this large-scale study investigates to what extent Moscow and Beijing’s narratives on World War II are converging. It finds that any convergence is one-sided, shallow and unstable, but nonetheless deserves our critical attention.

## Key findings

- **“Responsible major powers”**. Through their state-controlled media, Russia and China have actively sought to mobilise the memory of World War II to present themselves on the global scene as responsible major powers and guardians of the post-war global order. In a similar vein, they invoke the memory of World War II to urge the US and the West to refrain from squandering the principles of the “UN-centred world order” and obstructing the rise of emerging and developing economies.
- **“Guardians of World War II’s global lessons”**. Russian and Chinese discourses on World War II share a commitment to upholding the “lessons” of World War II against (what is framed as) opportunist distortions and historical revisionism by

antagonist forces, particularly in their direct neighbourhoods – e.g., Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states for Russia; Japan for China – but also more broadly in the West.

- **Joint war commemoration.** Starting in 2015, Russia and China have initiated joint commemorations of World War II on the bilateral, regional and global levels. Beijing has been by far the more active partner in this memory alliance, through propagandization of Russian Victory Day celebrations and replication of Moscow’s narratives. Insofar as Russia may have become a “junior partner” in the evolving China–Russia relationship, this is evidently not the case in their memory alliance. However, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, it appears that Beijing has begun to dial down its World War II commemorations and joint remembrances with Moscow.
- **Shallow convergence.** Despite efforts to align official memories for strategic ends, Russian and Chinese state-controlled media have produced distinct and in some cases conflicting historical narratives of this critical episode. Any convergence of their international narratives on World War II is one-sided, shallow and not grounded in their domestic discourses. Overall, the professed “no-limits” friendship between Moscow and Beijing lacks a solid basis grounded in shared historical narratives.
- **Differing world views.** Moscow and Beijing’s official representations of World War II differ in fundamental ways, reflecting differing world views, self-images and ambitions. With its preponderant emphasis on “historical truth”, Moscow’s discourse reflects a reactive and ideologically-oriented geopolitical agenda, with a particular focus on other post-Soviet countries. Conversely, Beijing’s rhetorical emphasis on the “outcomes” of World War II is aimed at supporting a pragmatic and proactive foreign policy agenda.

## Key recommendations

- **Avoid escalation of memory wars.** To prevent the expansion of current “hot” conflicts and eruption of new ones, it is crucial that ongoing “memory wars” over the legacies of World War II are mitigated and minimised. De-escalating memory conflicts is a shared responsibility that rests upon actors on both sides of the

geopolitical divide and hence also involves Western European actors. Forestalling a new round of memory-alliance building will thus require pro-active and prudent policy. This point must receive more attention in current public debates in the West.

- **Avoid emulation of authoritarian memory governance.** Rather than responding in kind to Moscow and Beijing's increasingly authoritarian memory governance practices, European states and institutions should avoid mirroring authoritarian memory governance practices with attempts of their own to dictate, codify and thereby securitise historical interpretations. At the same time, efforts must be stepped up to ensure (continued) safe and open environments at home for public and academic debate on controversial topics.
- **Additional research.** Historical narratives offer invaluable "shortcuts" to understanding ideology, strategic intent and (dis)information campaigns. Further research is needed to develop current understandings of authoritarian memory practices and emerging memory alliances. For a deeper understanding of structural trends and state agency in shaping strategic historical discourses it is necessary to also examine other parts of the past and representations beyond state-controlled media.