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# MANAGING THE DRAGON

A comprehensive analysis of Sweden's  
Relationship with China

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sweden's relationship with China is an increasingly important topic, with a growing need for a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities characterizing this multi-power relationship. Navigating the complex interplay of economic, military, political, and ideological domains, this thesis examines Sweden's evolving relationship with China using Michael Mann's IEMP-model. Utilizing expert interviews and policy documents, the study investigates how Sweden has managed its interests in the face of both opportunities and challenges. The research finds that Sweden has adeptly navigated its political and economic interests, despite ideological challenges and increasing significance of military issues. Strategic adaptability is underscored in Sweden's approach, as evidenced by its multilateral engagements and the leveraging of economic relationships for constructive dialogue on human rights. The study also reflects on potential future scenarios based on current trends, emphasizing the likely importance of multilateral collaborations. This thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of Sweden's strategy in maintaining its interests against the backdrop of an evolving geopolitical landscape, offering insights into the complexities of international relations.

**Keywords:** Sweden, China, Michael Mann, IEMP-model

1	Introduction.....	5
1.1	Research gap.....	6
1.2	Research questions .....	7
1.3	Purpose and aim .....	8
1.4	Delimitations .....	9
2	Theory.....	9
2.1	Introduction to the theory.....	9
2.2	Overview of Michael Mann’s The Sources of Social Power.....	12
2.2.1	Ideological Power.....	12
2.2.2	Economic Power.....	13
2.2.3	Military Power.....	14
2.2.4	Political Power .....	15
2.3	Critique.....	16
3	Trends .....	16
3.1	Ideological.....	17
3.1.1	Global Trends – Ideological.....	17
3.1.2	Regional Trends - Ideological .....	18
3.1.3	Bilateral Trends – Ideological .....	18
3.2	Economic.....	20
3.2.1	Global Trends – Economic.....	20
3.2.2	Regional Trends - Economic.....	21
3.2.3	Bilateral Trends – Economic .....	21
3.3	Military.....	23
3.3.1	Global Trends – Military.....	23
3.3.2	Regional Trends – Military .....	23
3.3.3	Bilateral Trends – Military.....	24
3.4	Political.....	25
3.4.1	Global Trends – Political.....	25

3.4.2 Regional Trends – Political .....	26
3.4.3 Bilateral Trends - Political .....	27
4 Method.....	28
4.1 Research Approach.....	28
4.2 Data Collection.....	30
4.2.1 Expert Interviews: Purpose and Approach.....	30
4.2.2 Policy Document analysis .....	32
4.3 Data Analysis .....	33
5 Analysis.....	35
5.1.1 Analysis of Ideological Power - Current Relationship.....	35
5.1.2 Analysis of Ideological Power – Future Relationship.....	37
5.2.1 Analysis of Economic Power - Current Relationship .....	39
5.2.2 Analysis of Economic Power - Future Relationship.....	42
5.3.1 Analysis of Military Power – Current Relationship.....	44
5.3.2 Analysis of Military Power - Future Relationship .....	47
5.4.1 Analysis of Political Power - Current Relationship .....	49
5.4.2 Analysis of Political Power - Future Relationship .....	52
6 Discussion.....	54
7 Conclusions.....	57
8 Bibliography.....	60
Appendix.....	67

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between Sweden and China has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a cooperative stance to one characterized by conflict and suspicion. This thesis analyses the challenges and opportunities inherent in this evolving relationship and offers insights into how Sweden can navigate an increasingly complex and unpredictable geopolitical landscape concerning China.

In January 1950, Swedish Foreign Minister Östen Undén took the first official step towards establishing diplomatic relations between Sweden and the People's Republic of China by sending a telegram to his Chinese counterpart, Zhou Enlai (Ljunggren, 2015). This marked Sweden as the first Western country to establish diplomatic ties with China, laying the groundwork for the continued development of the bilateral relationship.

Since then, the two nations have cooperatively engaged across various sectors such as trade, education, technology, and culture. In the early 2010s, Sweden emerged as a top destination for Chinese investment (Bohman, 2022), with Chinese companies and investors demonstrating increasing interest in the Swedish market, particularly in the technology, infrastructure, and energy sectors. The acquisition of Volvo Cars by Geely in 2010 exemplifies this trend, further strengthening ties between the countries and fostering new opportunities for cooperation (Bohman & Nymalm, 2020).

However, since 2015, the relationship has been marked by adverse developments, mainly due to the Gui Minhai case, which has given rise to multi-sectoral diplomatic conflicts between Sweden and China. The relationship deterioration has been further aggravated by Sweden's decision to exclude Chinese Huawei from building the country's 5G network (Almén & Weidacher Hsiung, 2022). Additionally, the appointment of Gui Congyou, China's former ambassador to Sweden, in 2017 has contributed to the decline of the bilateral relationship. Known for his aggressive and confrontational diplomacy, Congyou's approach exemplifies the emerging wolf warrior diplomacy, which entails Chinese diplomats adopting a more offensive and confrontational stance toward other countries in defence of China's national interests (Sundqvist & Lindberg, 2022; Bohman & Pårup, 2022).

These developments and changes in diplomacy have increased conflicts and mistrust between Sweden and China, affecting their bilateral relationship and Sweden's standing in global politics and cooperation.

In light of these developments and some other factors, the attitudes of the Swedish population towards China have undergone a marked shift. Recent studies indicate that the general perception of China in Sweden ranks among the most negative globally (Rühlig et al., 2020; Turcsányi et al., 2020; Sundqvist et al., 2022). The primary factors driving this change in public opinion include adverse developments concerning democracy and human rights in China, as well as the Chinese state's attitude and treatment of Sweden (Sundqvist et al., 2022). Additionally, significant shifts in attitudes and perceptions regarding Chinese investments in Sweden have contributed to these changes.

In response to the challenges and lack of expertise in navigating this evolving relationship, the Swedish government established the Swedish National China Centre in 2019 to address issues particularly relevant to Swedish interests (Skr. 2019/20:18). Furthermore, the Swedish government has emphasized the importance of maintaining a constructive relationship with China, given that China is among Sweden's largest import partners and has maintained high levels of imports for several years (SCB, 2023).

## 1.1 Research gap

While existing research provides a rich overview of the Sweden-China relationship, much of it offers a fragmented perspective, primarily focusing on individual issues or domains (Sundqvist & Lindberg, 2022; Pårup, 2022; Sundqvist et al., 2022; Bohman & Lindberg, 2022 et al.). Additionally, several studies predominantly concentrate on historical aspects rather than examining the current and evolving dynamics (Ottosson, 2019; Ljunggren, 2009; Ljunggren, 2015 et al.).

In the context of recent developments and changing attitudes towards China in Sweden, it is crucial to understand the relationship comprehensively across various sources of social power - ideological, economic, military, and political. This comprehensive understanding will allow

us to unravel the intricate interplay of these domains and their impact on the bilateral relations.

However, this perspective is not adequately explored in the current literature. A theoretical framework that offers this multifaceted analysis is Michael Mann's IEMP-model (Ideological, Economic, Military, Political) (Mann, 1986). Although this model has been employed in various geopolitical contexts, it has not yet been applied to scrutinize the Sweden-China relationship. Therefore, this study intends to bridge this gap by offering a comprehensive and integrated analysis of the relationship, utilizing Mann's IEMP-model.

This study's exploration of potential future scenarios for the relationship will contribute to the understanding of how to address emerging challenges and opportunities in the Sweden-China interactions, an aspect that existing research sometimes overlooks. This application of Mann's theory also introduces a new theoretical approach for analysing the relationship, potentially enabling the development of more effective, nuanced strategies and policies.

## 1.2 Research questions

With the context of Sweden's relationship with China in mind, this thesis delves into a deeper, nuanced exploration. The research is structured around a main research question and three supporting queries, each targeting a distinct aspect of this intricate bilateral relationship.

### Main Research Question

*How has Sweden managed its interests (in terms of Michael Mann's economic, political, military, and ideological domains) in its evolving relationship with China?*

### Subordinate Research Question

*1: What key dynamics and influencing factors have shaped Sweden's success in maintaining its interests across these four domains in its relationship with China?*

*2: How has Sweden adapted its strategies in these four domains in response to changes in its relationship with China?*

*3: Based on current trends and influences, how might Sweden continue to maintain its interests in its future relationship with China across these four domains?*

After presenting the research questions, it's important to clarify a significant aspect of this study. This research considers potential future scenarios for Sweden's relationship with China. However, predicting future international relations with precision is challenging due to inherent complexities and uncertainties. Therefore, the future scenarios outlined in this thesis should be seen as exploratory reflections rather than concrete predictions. These are based on expert opinions, policy documents, and current trends, and tries to identify potential policy implications rather than predicting the future.

### 1.3 Purpose and aim

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the evolution of Sweden's relationship with China across the ideological, economic, military, and political domains of social power. Utilizing Michael Mann's IEMP-model as the guiding framework, this research intends to provide a comprehensive analysis of key dynamics, factors, and trends that have shaped this bilateral relationship (Mann, 1986). This multidimensional approach goes beyond traditional International Relations (IR) theories to offer a new perspective on the complex interplay of these four domains of power, bringing valuable nuances to the understanding of Sweden's relationship with China.

The aim of this research is two-fold: first, to shed light on the complexities of Sweden's relationship with China, providing a clear, comprehensive picture of its relationship across different dimensions of social power; second, to identify possible future avenues for this relationship based on expert interview and policy documents. While this includes some exploration of potential future scenarios, it's important to note that these should not be viewed as definitive predictions.

This research serves to bridge a gap in existing scholarship by offering a new way of understanding Sweden's relationship with China, one that embraces the multidimensional sources of power and international relations. In this sense, it contributes to the literature by extending the application of Mann's IEMP-model to this specific case, highlighting its potential to provide fresh insights that other IR theories may not fully capture.



Besides its academic contribution, this study is intended to serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, professionals, and researchers dealing with Sweden-China relations. By illuminating the various dimensions of the relationship and offering insights into potential future avenues, this study can inform and guide the development of more nuanced and effective strategies for managing this important bilateral relationship.

## 1.4 Delimitations

This study will adhere to several delimitations and assumptions to make it manageable and focused within the context of a master's thesis. Firstly, this study will primarily adopt a Swedish perspective, focusing on Sweden's relationship with China across four domains of power: ideological, economic, military, and political. This focus allows a detailed exploration of the intricacies and nuances of Sweden's interactions with China across multiple sectors and dimensions.

Furthermore, the study primarily relies on expert interviews and policy documents from Swedish authorities, thereby predominantly representing the Swedish viewpoint. While the Chinese perspective will be considered where relevant and available, the research focus is on understanding Sweden's approach. This approach is predicated on the underlying assumption that a deeper understanding of Sweden's stance and strategy is key to interpreting and forecasting how Sweden can maintain and further develop a constructive relationship with China in a evolving global dynamics and challenges.

## 2 Theory

### 2.1 Introduction to the theory

To address the complexity of Sweden's relationship with China, this study adopts Michael Mann's (1986) multidimensional theory, departing from more traditional International Relations (IR) approaches such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism. It's worth to note that Mann, while not traditionally viewed as an IR theorist, developed a theory of power that offers valuable and applicable insights into international relations, especially in situations as

multifaceted as this relationship. The choice of Mann's framework requires a thorough explanation of its advantages and why it is suitable for answering the research questions. However, I will first briefly explain why some traditional IRs are not the best fit for this paper.

Firstly, realism, with its focus on power politics and the pursuit of national interests, might seem like a natural starting point for analysing international relations. However, while it provides insights into the power dynamics and geopolitical strategies at play (Morgenthau, 1948), it may not adequately account for the influence of ideological and economic factors in shaping Sweden's relationship with China. A study conducted by Christie (2021) offers an insightful exploration of the role of technological and geopolitical strategies in international relations, specifically on how small and medium-sized states position themselves in relation to China and Huawei. However, his study focuses primarily on the geopolitical implication and leaves room for further exploration of the economic and ideological dimensions. Similarly, Bekkevold's (2021) study of Norway's relationship with China emphasizes the significance of structural realist factors, but it may overlook the importance of other dimensions of power in shaping this relationship.

Liberalism, which emphasizes cooperation, international institutions, and the promotion of democratic values and human rights, could shed light on aspects of Sweden's relationship with China (Keohane and Nye, 1977). However, the limitations of liberalism become apparent when addressing normative dilemmas that arise when domestic liberal principles come into conflict with the 'core interests' of the Chinese authorities (Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2016). Furthermore, a study conducted by Sørensen (2016) illustrates this tension between Denmark's liberal values and economic imperatives when dealing with a rising global power like China, indicating the need for a more nuanced approach.

Constructivism focuses on the role of social constructions, norms, and identities in shaping international relations (Wendt, 1999). It may provide valuable insights into ideational aspects of Sweden's relationship with China, but may fall short in addressing the broader economic, military, and political factors. For example, a study on EU-China understandings of the international system (Scott, 2013) further illustrates this limitation. While it elaborates on nuanced concepts like "multipolarity" and "multilateralism", it arguably overlooks the complex interplay of other power dimensions. This reinforces the argument for applying

Mann's multidimensional power theory to capture the full complexity of the Sweden-China relations.

Compared to traditional IR theories, Mann's IEMP-model presents a more comprehensive and nuanced lens for answering the research questions. Traditional IR theories, as mentioned earlier, such as Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism often assume states as unitary actors and predetermine the nature of interaction (cooperative or competitive) between states. Such assumptions limit their capacity to capture the complex interplay of ideological, economic, military, and political power that influences state behaviour (Morgenthau, 1948; Keohane and Nye, 1977; Wendt, 1999).

In contrast, Mann's model encourages a more dynamic approach (Mann, 1986). The main research question requires a theoretical framework that can handle multifaceted interactions. Mann's theory, with its emphasis on the simultaneous interplay of ideological, economic, military, and political powers, presents such a capability. The complex nature of international relations, as showcased in the Sweden-China relationship, calls for an analytical tool that can capture these multi-dimensional dynamics. Mann's IEMP-model offers this tool. Similarly, Mann's framework is suited to tackle the subordinate research questions. It delves into the key dynamics and influencing factors that have shaped the evolution of Sweden's relationship with China across these domains and provides a platform to analyse potential trajectories for this relationship.

Furthermore, as argued by Alden and Aran (2016), Mann's model offers a more encompassing perspective by examining the interplay of ideological, economic, military, and political factors. In contrast to traditional IR theories, Mann's approach provides a holistic, nuanced, and context-specific framework that allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities within international relations. As Alden & Aran (2016) clarify, Mann's theory recognizes the state as embedded in both domestic and international environments, acknowledges the influence of individual and social elements within the state, and emphasizes the interaction of various forms of power. These unique aspects, they argue, make Mann's model particularly suited to unravelling the multifaceted dynamics in international relationships.

## 2.2 Overview of Michael Mann's The Sources of Social Power

This thesis employs Michael Mann's 'The Sources of Social Power' as its primary theoretical framework, chosen for its comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach to understanding social power dynamics (Mann, 1986). This framework facilitates a more nuanced analysis of the Sweden-China relationship by examining the interplay of ideological, economic, military, and political factors. The relationship between Sweden and China is unquestionably intricate and has become increasingly more so in recent years. Mann's theory is employed as a model that accounts for various factors in the relationship between Sweden and China, including trade relations, security issues, diplomatic ties, and ideological differences.

The four sources of power - ideological, economic, military, and political - are analysed to comprehend their impact on the relationship between Sweden and China. Mann's theory investigates the role these factors play in the relationship and acknowledges that the sources of power differ in magnitude and scope in different regions of the world and at distinct historical periods (Mann, 1986). While Mann's original framework was seminal, it was conceived in the 1980s, and, thus, some aspects are only partially applicable to the current geopolitical context. In order to better fit the contours of contemporary Sweden-China relations, I've modified Mann's framework, particularly regarding military power, to address some limitations when applied to contemporary international relations (see 2.2.3 Military Power).

In the following, I will present Michael Mann's four primary sources of social power. These sources constitute overlapping networks of social interactions and institutional means to achieve human objectives. He emphasizes that these sources of power are not mutually exclusive but typically interact and reinforce each other (Mann, 1986).

### 2.2.1 Ideological Power

Mann describes three interconnected aspects of ideological power: beliefs and knowledge based on Weber's concepts, shared norms influencing moral behaviour and facilitating social cooperation, and aesthetic and ritual practices (Weber, 1968; Mann, 1986). Ideological power suggests that people seek meaning in life, share values and norms, and participate in aesthetic

and ritual practices. Religions provide numerous examples of this, as do secular ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, and nationalism. For ideological power to be effective in social networks, it must be institutionalized in organizations like churches, schools, and media and transmitted through carriers such as priests or media.

In the case of Sweden and China, the countries differ in several respects, particularly concerning human rights and political systems. Sweden is a liberal democracy where citizens vote and elect their leaders and is renowned for its strong commitment to individual freedom and human rights, a central component of the liberal democratic ideology. China, conversely, is an autocratic one-party state with a distinct political system and an ideology emphasizing the importance of the state and the collective over individual rights. These differences in ideological power and views on human rights are crucial for understanding the complex relationship between Sweden and China.

### 2.2.2 Economic Power

According to Mann's analysis, social groups or “classes” are formed around the task of addressing needs through the social organization of extraction, transformation, distribution, and consumption of natural resources (Mann, 1986). Class formations combine a high level of intensive and extensive power, significantly influencing societal development. Mann identifies four phases in the development of class relations and class struggle, but, unlike Marx, he believes that classes are essential, yet not the “motor of history” as Marx suggested (Marx, 1859; Mann, 1986).

Mann also asserts that economic organization consists of cycles of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, involving both extensive and intensive practical work by the majority of the population. He refers to this configuration as “circuits proxy” and observes that the close connection between intensive local production and extensive exchange circuits will determine the organization of classes and class struggle (Mann, 1986).

The concept of economic power, as proposed by Mann, is a valuable tool for analysing the structure of economic organization and the subsequent dynamics of power. Utilizing this framework, one can analyse the economic power relations between different societies and

countries based on the circuits of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption that operate between them.

In the case of Sweden and China, Mann's theory of economic power can be employed to examine how trade relations, investments, and economic cooperation influence the balance of power between the two nations. Sweden, as a smaller and more open economy, relies on international trade and sees China as an essential trade partner. China's economic power can manifest through its investments in Sweden, as well as its influence over global economic institutions.

### 2.2.3 Military Power

Mann consider military power as a separate form of social power, distinct from political power. Most theorists, especially Marx and Weber do not distinguish between the two, because they generally view the state as “the repository of physical force in society” (Marx, 1867; Weber, 1968; Mann, 1986; Silva, 2013). He argues that military power arises from the need for physical defence and the potential for aggression, and when monopolized by a military elite, it can provide collective and distributive power (Mann, 1986; Silva, 2013). Mann identifies two historical functions of military power structures: geopolitical competition and internal repression.

Mann's definition of military power can be perceived as somewhat narrow, as it primarily focuses on traditional military capabilities (Mann, 1986). In the contemporary global context, the traditional definition of military power has evolved to encompass a broader range of activities, including espionage and cyberattacks. Espionage plays a critical role in modern statecraft, as it provides states with valuable intelligence that informs their strategic decision-making. In the Sweden-China relationship, reports of Chinese espionage activities have raised concerns about the security of Swedish infrastructure and the protection of intellectual property rights (SÄPO, 2023; MUST, 2022). Similarly, cyberattacks have emerged as a powerful tool in military and strategic operations, with potential consequences ranging from disrupting critical infrastructure to stealing sensitive data or spreading disinformation.

By incorporating these aspects of military power into my analysis, I can better understand the complex dynamics of contemporary international relations and more accurately assess the Sweden-China relationship.

#### 2.2.4 Political Power

Mann defines political power as regulation and coercion that are centrally administered and tied to a specific territory, which essentially constitutes state power. Political power diverges from other forms of power because it is inherently centralized and territorial (Mann, 1986). State power can be divided into two organizational aspects: a territorially centralized one and an international one, which deals with relations between states and what Mann terms geopolitical diplomacy.

Through “geopolitical diplomacy,” Mann refers to the utilization of political power by states to negotiate and compete on the international stage (Mann, 1986). This involves employing diplomatic and strategic manoeuvres, such as alliances, negotiations, agreements, and economic pressures, to advance a state's interests and achieve its geopolitical objectives. This type of power originates from states' capacity to project their influence beyond their borders and engage in relations with other states based on mutual recognition and respect. It is a vital aspect of international relations and plays a pivotal role in the distribution of power and resources in the global system.

In the context of the Sweden-China relationship, this means analysing how political power is employed to establish and maintain diplomatic ties, as well as negotiate and enforce international agreements and arrangements between the two nations.

Mann emphasizes that his IEMP-model should be viewed as an analytical tool rather than a structural description of society. The model serves as a framework for comprehending society, but Mann concedes that “societies are much messier than our theories about them” (Mann, 1986). By utilizing political power, I can attain a deeper understanding of Sweden's diplomatic relationship with China and how political power structures influence their interactions and collaboration on the international stage.

## 2.3 Critique

It is worth noting that Mann's approach has generated debates and attracted criticism. There are scholarly articles that critically engage with, analyze, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Mann's model, as seen in publications by various authors (Hall & Schroeder, 2006). Additionally, a critique of Mann's work can be found in an article by Hobson (2006) where he criticizes Mann's theory for being Eurocentric and neorealistic. However, this thesis does not extensively address these specific critiques. Instead, it primarily focuses on assessing the framework's utility within the context of Sweden-China relations.

## 3 Trends

The literature review in this thesis employs a three-tiered approach - global, regional, and bilateral - to examine the relationship between Sweden and China through the lens of Michael Mann's IEMP-model. This comprehensive approach allows for the identification and analysis of long-term trends and patterns in each dimension of social power - ideology, economics, military, and politics - impacting Sweden's relationship with China over a 15-year period. By situating Sweden-China relations within the broader global and regional contexts, the literature review offers a nuanced understanding of how various factors and events have shaped the relationship between these two countries.

The global perspective, in particular, highlights the impact of China's growth across the IEMP-domains and its evolving relationship with the West. This has led to an increasingly complex and dynamic international environment, in which Sweden, as a part of the broader Western community, has had to navigate its relationship with China. This perspective is crucial to understanding the broader implications of global trends on Sweden's relationship with China, as well as how the bilateral relationship is nested within these larger dynamics.

Secondly, the regional perspective examines how regional factors and trends, including EU's policies and strategies towards China, impact Sweden-China relations. This perspective further highlights China's growth in every domain within the regional context, which has influenced the dynamics between EU member states and China. As a member of the EU, Sweden's choices are shaped and influenced by its membership, and this perspective explores



how relations between EU countries and China may affect one another. This aspect also offers a better understanding of the influence of regional security issues and economic trends on the Sweden-China relationship, demonstrating that the bilateral relationship is further nested within the regional context.

Finally, the bilateral perspective delves into the specific aspects of Sweden-China relations, exploring their trends over time and the influence of both internal and external factors. In summary, the literature review's three-tiered structure systematically examines the various trends and factors affecting Sweden's relationship with China over the past 15 years, moving from global to regional to bilateral levels. This approach presents a dynamic and nuanced picture of how these relationships have changed and developed over time, laying the groundwork for a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between Sweden and China in the subsequent parts of the thesis.

### 3.1 Ideological

#### 3.1.1 Global Trends – Ideological

In recent years, ideological tensions between the West and China have emerged because of the resurgence of ideology and China's growing influence. Major events, such as China's growing interactions with United Nations human rights and the rise of Xi Jinping, have contributed to this complex relationship (Richardson, 2020; Schröder, 2022).

As Western liberal democracies grapple with the rise of authoritarianism, they face the difficult task of reconciling their values with China's ascent (Diamond, 2019). This has resulted in ideological tensions and a delicate balance, as the West seeks to forge partnerships with China on crucial global issues, despite underlying ideological differences and obstacles (Shambaugh, 2020).

Examining global trends through the lens of the resurgence of ideology provides a understanding of how these factors impact between the Western world and China (Ikenberry, 2018). In summary, over the past 15 years, ideological power has become a key factor in global trends between the Western world and China.

### 3.1.2 Regional Trends- Ideological

Moving from the global to the regional context, the relationship between the EU and China has been marked by tensions centred around human rights, political freedoms, and contrasting views on political systems. The EU has expressed deep concerns regarding China's treatment of dissidents, minorities, the increasing censorship of the internet, and restrictions on freedom of expression (Ljunggren, 2015; Gallemí, 2021). These concerns arise from the expanding influence of the Chinese Communist Party, which shapes China's policies and often clashes with the EU's values that prioritize human rights and democracy (Schröder, 2022).

China has accused the EU of interfering in its internal affairs and asserted the principle of non-intervention (Ekman, 2022). This reflects China's view on sovereignty and how human rights should be managed. Furthermore, China's growing global influence, including in Europe, has led to increased tensions and a sense of competition between the EU and China.

The EU's universalist perspective on human rights and emphasis on democracy clash with China's ideological view prioritizing public order over individual rights, creating tensions (Ekman, 2022). In summary, ideological trends between the EU and China over the past 15 years have been characterized by tensions surrounding human rights and political freedoms, as well as differences in views on political systems and values. Despite some improvements in relations, these differences continue to pose a challenge to cooperation between the EU and China.

### 3.1.3 Bilateral Trends – Ideological

#### *Increased Cultural and Academic Exchanges and Growing Concerns*

Regarding bilateral relations, Sweden and China enjoyed a period of extensive cultural and academic exchanges in the late 2000s and mid-2010s. These bilateral exchanges promoted the understanding of Chinese ideas in Sweden, which meant that more students and researchers came to Sweden, spreading Chinese influence (Andersson-Åkerblom, 2022).

From the mid-2010s, Swedish dissatisfaction with China grew, and along with several European countries, Sweden became increasingly critical of China's lack of respect for human rights and freedom of speech (Silver et al., 2020). As China expanded its presence on the global stage, awareness of its authoritarian model and its potential impact on other countries' values increased. Sweden, which had previously sought to promote its values in China, now needed to focus on defending democratic principles at home as China expanded. At the same time, the discussion of Chinese influence intensified as Swedish media and opinion-makers highlighted China's actions and influenced Swedish public opinion. Reports on the situation in Xinjiang, the treatment of Uighurs, and the case of Swedish-Chinese publisher Gui Minhai affected the view of China and their human rights in Sweden (Pårup, 2022).

### *The Controversial Case of Gui Minhai and Increased Tensions*

One notable case that has intensified tensions between Sweden and China is that of Gui Minhai. Gui Minhai, a Swedish-Chinese book publisher, was arrested and imprisoned in China in 2015, prompting strong reactions in Sweden and demands for his release (Sundqvist et al., 2022). Sweden, known for its commitment to human rights and democratic values, expressed concerns over China's treatment of human rights activists, publishers, journalists, and minorities (Sundqvist et al., 2022). Swedish authorities called on China to uphold human rights principles and provide a fair and open trial for Gui Minhai. This case exemplifies the ideological differences between the two countries and has contributed to heightened tensions since the mid-2010s.

After the Gui Minhai incident, awareness of China's restrictions on freedom of speech and lack of respect for human rights increased. Sweden's former Foreign Minister Ann Linde spoke on several occasions about China's human rights violations and was criticized by Chinese officials who called her statements false (Bøje Forsby, 2021). Parallel to the growing dissatisfaction with China, Sweden strengthened its alliances and collaborations with its Nordic neighbours, openly criticizing China's human rights situation. The Chinese embassies in the Nordic countries responded by becoming increasingly vocal in their discontent, accusing the Nordic countries of interfering in China's internal affairs (Bøje Forsby, 2021).

### *Sweden's Criticism of China's Lack of Human Rights*

Additionally, Sweden has expressed concern about China's lack of transparency in human rights documentation, supporting an independent investigation into alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Tibet (Skrv. 2019/20:18). Sweden's foreign policy towards China underscores its commitment to human rights, democracy, and rule of law, calling for increased EU-China cooperation on these issues. Consequently, Swedish attitudes towards China are predominantly skeptical due to concerns about its authoritarian rule, lack of free speech, and human rights disrespect (Pårup, 2022).

In summary, the literature indicates that ideological differences, particularly around human rights, and democratic values, have become increasingly salient in Sweden-China relations. These trends have significant implications for how Sweden navigates its relationship with China in an increasingly complex and dynamic global context.

## 3.2 Economic

### 3.2.1 Global Trends – Economic

The post-2008 global financial crisis reshaped the global economic landscape, with China's rapid recovery and stimulus measures leading to a shift of economic power from the West to the East (Reinhart & Rogoff, 2009; Gamble, 2010; Zhao, 2023). In this context, China has surpassed the United States as the world's largest economy, with its GDP accounting for a growing share of the global output.

This period also saw escalating tensions between China and the West, particularly the US, due to protectionist policies and tariffs that disrupted global trade and investment flows (Sjöholm, 2023). Concurrently, recognition of climate change and the importance of sustainable development propelled renewable energy to prominence, with China emerging as a significant player (Gielen et al., 2020). This led to collaborative efforts between the West and China to tackle climate change and build a sustainable future, despite political and economic differences (Ripsman, 2021). Thus, the last 15 years have seen a transfer of economic power to the East and intensified economic competition, marking China's ascendancy on the global economic stage. These global trends have important implications for regional dynamics within the EU, which will be examined next.

### 3.2.2 Regional Trends- Economic

Examining regional economic trends reveals a significant increase in trade relations between the EU and China, leading to deepening economic interdependence (Jindřichovská & Uğurlu, 2021). China's rapid economic growth and expanding middle class have provided European businesses with new opportunities for expansion and increased export revenues. However, the EU has expressed concerns regarding China's trade practices, including alleged state subsidies and limited market access for European companies (European Parliament, 2021).

China's economic growth and increased foreign investment have facilitated its growing presence in the global market, creating both cooperative and competitive dynamics for the EU economy (D'Ambrogio, 2021). In response to reducing dependence on China, the EU has pursued diversification strategies by establishing trade agreements with other Asian countries. This diversification has resulted in reduced reliance on the Chinese market while promoting balanced trade relations with other emerging economies. Additionally, the EU has adopted a more assertive approach towards China, introducing initiatives to safeguard strategic industries, enhance technological capabilities, and promote innovation (European Commission, 2016; European Commission, 2019).

The evolving economic dynamics between the EU and China have been characterized by a combination of cooperation and competition. The EU's strategy for managing its relationship with China has adapted over time to address market access barriers, foster a more balanced economic relationship, and advocate for human rights (European Parliament, 2021). Despite challenges the EU and China have continued to deepen their economic ties while adjusting to the evolving global economic landscape.

### 3.2.3 Bilateral Trends – Economic

#### *Growing Trade and Investments with China*

Sweden's bilateral relations with China have seen a significant rise in exports driven by China's rapid economic expansion and a growing demand for Swedish products (Ljunggren,

2015). Although the growth in trade has contributed to economic expansion and competitiveness, it also poses challenges in managing trade balance and promoting sustainable development.

Swedish companies like Volvo, Ericsson, and ABB have bolstered their presence in China, facilitating knowledge transfer and technical cooperation (Ljunggren, 2015). The acquisition of Volvo Cars by Geely in 2010 marked a significant shift in Sweden-China economic relations, influencing the Swedish economy and job market while paving the way for further collaboration (Bohman & Nymalm, 2020).

### *Challenges and Concerns in Economic Cooperation*

However, increased economic cooperation with China poses risks and challenges for Sweden. The influx of Chinese goods intensifies competition for Swedish companies domestically and internationally (Bohman & Nymalm, 2020). Chinese investments in Swedish industries may impact Swedish economic strategy and long-term prospects. Swedish businesses also grapple with obstacles like legal uncertainty and uneven competition due to state-supported Chinese firms when entering the Chinese market (Bohman & Nymalm, 2020). These challenges affect the capacity of Swedish companies to fully exploit the Chinese market.

Moreover, the struggle over economic power between Sweden and China has implications beyond bilateral relations, influencing trade, investment, and dependencies involving Sweden, the EU, and China. The increasing Chinese economic influence has raised concerns about potential political impacts on EU decision-making, leading to discussions about diversifying trade and safeguarding European industries from Chinese influence (Bohman & Nymalm, 2020).

In recent years, Sweden's economic relations with China have become increasingly complex, with human rights issues impacting trade and contributing to heightened tensions (Pårup, 2022; Bohman & Pårup, 2022). Nevertheless, both countries continue to seek opportunities for cooperation in trade and investments.

In summary, the economic relationship between Sweden and China is a complex interplay of global, regional, and bilateral factors. From a global perspective, the shift of economic power to the East, increased economic competition. Regionally, the EU's approach towards China,

characterized by both cooperation and competition, has shaped the economic dynamics between Sweden and China. Bilaterally, while increased trade and investments have brought economic benefits, they have also led to competition and legal uncertainties.

### 3.3 Military

#### 3.3.1 Global Trends – Military

A key trend in the global military landscape over the past 15 years has been China's significant military expansion, which has escalated global tensions and intensified geopolitical competition (Heath, 2023). Key points to highlight include China's accelerated military build-up since the late 2000s and its increased use of non-traditional military methods, such as espionage and cyberattacks, alongside Iran and Russia (SÄPO, 2023; Valeriano et al., 2018). These developments have necessitated the West to adapt its security strategies and invest in military defence (Heath, 2023).

In addition to China's military growth, changes in US security policy have further complicated the West's relationship with China. Specifically, the US "Pivot to Asia" strategy and its more aggressive stance towards China have contributed to a denser and more challenging global security environment (Singh, 2019). Consequently, Western countries have had to navigate between the US's and China's competing strategies while managing the escalating tension between East and West (Swaine, 2018).

In summary, these trends have significantly affected the West's military relationship with China, resulting in a more intricate and uncertain global security environment. Western countries have had to adapt their security policy strategies and collaborate with other nations to address the challenges and changes brought on by China's growing military power.

#### 3.3.2 Regional Trends – Military

Focusing on regional military trends, over the past 15 years, China's military modernization and increased defence spending have led to growing concerns within the EU, impacting the region's security policy. In response to China's military modernization, increased defence

spending, and more aggressive actions in areas such as the South China Sea, the EU has increased its focus on regional security and defence cooperation, both within the Union and with NATO (European Council, 2023).

EU member countries have increased their defence spending and focused on developing domestic defence industries (Tian et al., 2020). The Arctic has also received increased attention, with the EU urging Nordic countries to be vigilant about China's investments in the region and conducting more military operations there (Almén & Weidacher-Hsiung, 2022). Additionally, the EU has urged member states to avoid Chinese telecom providers like Huawei and ZTE for their 5G networks due to security risks (Grieger, 2019).

Cyber warfare has also characterized the EU-China relationship, with the EU accusing China of espionage and cyberattacks against critical targets (Cerulus, 2020). These military trends between the EU and China underscore the importance of regional security and cooperation in a time of increasing geopolitical competition.

### 3.3.3 Bilateral Trends – Military

#### *Cybersecurity and Espionage Concerns*

The evolution of Sweden's bilateral military relationship with China can be attributed to growing concerns over cybersecurity and espionage. During the late 2000s and the 2010s, Sweden's awareness of potential threats from China in these areas led to considerable changes in the dynamics between the two countries. In response to escalating cyber threats, Sweden developed a National Strategy for Society's Information Security and Cybersecurity (Skr. 2016/17:213: 9). The Swedish Security Service (henceforth SÄPO) noted a significant shift in China's espionage activities against Sweden since the mid-2010s, intensifying focus on areas where Sweden is considered a leader (Englund, 2019). This has led to increased attention to China within Swedish Military Intelligence and Security Service (henceforth MUST) and SÄPO, highlighting the rising threat level associated with China (MUST, 2019; SÄPO, 2019).

#### *Sweden's Evolving Security Policy and China's Reaction*



Sweden is adjusting its security policy and defence legislation to deal with the deteriorating security situation in the region, particularly after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale war in 2022. This ongoing process has likely contributed to creating space for reassessing the stance towards China as well (Bohman & Nymalm, 2020).

In 2019, the Swedish government proposed changes to the law on the protection of national security in the use of radio and telecommunications equipment. These changes meant that the Swedish Post and Telecom Authority (PTS) would consult with SÄPO and the Armed Forces when auctioning Sweden's 5G network. The purpose was to ensure that no equipment posing a risk to national security would be installed in the country's telecommunications network. In October 2020, because of security assessments, PTS excluded the Chinese suppliers Huawei and ZTE from participating in the construction of key features in Sweden's 5G network (Sundqvist et al., 2022). The decision provoked strong reactions from China and gained global attention (Bohman, 2022). This incident has substantially influenced Sweden's evolving view of China, which now closely echoes the European Union's "more realistic" stance on China (European Commission, 2019).

Transitioning towards the discussion on NATO, it is worth noting that China has voiced unease over Sweden's increased inclination towards NATO membership. According to the Chinese government, Sweden's incorporation into NATO could instigate regional instability. Further, China has proactively cautioned that such a move would directly impact the bilateral relationship between Sweden and China (Pårup, 2022).

To conclude, the military trends between Sweden and China over the past 15 years underscore the shifting landscape of global and regional security. Driven by escalating concerns over cybersecurity, espionage, and regional stability, Sweden's bilateral military relationship with China has undergone significant changes.

### 3.4 Political

#### 3.4.1 Global Trends – Political

In the past 15 years, the landscape of global politics has been notably marked by China's increasingly assertive and tougher diplomacy towards the Western society (Mazarr & Brands,

2017). As China's power has grown across various domains, it has confidently engaged in geopolitical diplomacy, leading to more frequent diplomatic conflicts between China and the West (Mearsheimer, 2019).

This shift is evidenced by a series of events, including territorial disputes in the South China Sea (Mazarr & Brands, 2017), an increasing number of diplomatic disputes with the US (Friedberg, 2018), and China's growing influence in international organizations (Greiger, 2019). These developments have forced Western countries to reassess their relationships with China and adapt their political strategies to navigate this evolving landscape.

In summary, the rise of China's political confidence and its assertive diplomacy have significantly impacted global political trends, resulting in more diplomatic conflicts between the West and China and shaping the international system (Mearsheimer, 2019).

#### 3.4.2 Regional Trends – Political

Examining regional political trends, EU-China relations over the past 15 years have been characterized by both cooperation and competition, with the EU navigating its economic interests alongside concerns about human rights, intellectual property rights, and national security (Lippert & Perthes, 2020). The EU's change in strategy, focusing on diplomacy between equal partners instead of imposing European norms on China, led to some improvement in relations, but tensions persist due to ideological differences and Xi Jinping's authoritarian leadership (Michalski & Pan, 2015). The shifting global balance of power, with China as a growing superpower, has driven these political trends. The EU's adaptation to this change has involved navigating between cooperation and competition while maintaining its values and interests.

Despite challenges, the EU and China have cooperated in areas like climate change and global health (Li & He, 2022). The EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy involves balancing its interests and values while engaging with China on common global challenges (Li & He, 2022). However, achieving EU unity has proven difficult due to differing national interests and relationships with China among member countries, leading to tensions and affecting the union's ability to follow its China strategy (Cafruny et al., 2023).

### 3.4.3 Bilateral Trends- Political

#### *Diplomatic Turning Points and Tensions*

A pivotal moment in Sweden-China relations occurred in 2008 when former-Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt visited China, marking the first visit of a Swedish prime minister in over 13 years, and opening a period of increased cooperation (Ljunggren, 2009). However, an incident in 2009, involving the expulsion of diplomats on both sides, highlighted ongoing tensions (Thörnqvist, 2020). In 2010, despite the tensions, the countries celebrated 60 years of diplomatic relations, showcasing a shared commitment to cooperation.

#### *The Political Relationship in the 2010s*

Despite positive signals after the 60th anniversary to increase trade and knowledge exchange, the relationship never really took off. The diplomatic relationship took a sharp turn in 2015 with the case of Gui Minhai. Sweden demanded that China release Gui and condemned his treatment (Sundqvist et al., 2022). This increased diplomatic tensions, as China considered Sweden to be interfering in its internal affairs.

In 2018, a diplomatic crisis emerged when Swedish police took Chinese tourists into custody, leading to accusations of mistreatment and discrimination, expelling diplomats, and China warning its citizens against traveling to Sweden (Bohman, 2021). This incident occurred amid Sweden's criticism of China's treatment of Gui Minhai and the Dalai Lama's visit to Sweden. The year later, in 2019, tensions persisted as the Tucholsky Prize was awarded to Gui Minhai, with China demanding respect for its legislation (Sundqvist et al., 2022). Ambassador Gui Congyou played a significant role in worsening relations, criticizing the Swedish media, and pressuring politicians on China-related issues, increasing mistrust between the countries (Bohman, 2022).

#### *Sweden's Rapprochement with the West and Cooperation with the EU*

Parallel to the deterioration of diplomatic relations, Sweden has moved closer to the United States and EU on issues related to China. By strengthening its ties Sweden positions itself in an increasingly polarized global order and supports a common strategy for dealing with

China's growing political power. This development has meant that Sweden increasingly cooperates with the EU to coordinate its efforts and present a united front towards China (Grieger, 2019; European Commission, 2019). Sweden's stance on Huawei and 5G networks can be illustrated in this context (Bohman & Pårup, 2022). This decision created further diplomatic tensions between Sweden and China, and China threatened to take countermeasures against Swedish companies operating in the Chinese market. At the same time, geopolitical diplomacy plays an important role in the Sweden-China relationship, as both countries constantly try to balance their interests and objectives on the international stage.

The political bilateral relationship between Sweden and China has gone through several turning points and periods of tensions over the past decades. Despite some improvements and joint efforts in certain areas, the relationship has been characterized by diplomatic crises, criticism, and conflicts. Sweden has moved closer to the West and the EU on issues related to China, which can be seen as strategic positioning in an increasingly polarized world order.

## 4 Method

This chapter presents the methodology used in my thesis, including discussions on the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen research design. In order to answer these research questions, a qualitative single-case study will be conducted, which includes the collection and analysis of data from interviews with experts and document analysis of policy documents from relevant Swedish authorities.

### 4.1 Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research method, leveraging expert interviews and document analysis, to probe into the multifaceted aspects of Sweden's relationship with China. Through capturing expert perceptions, opinions, and experiences, as well as interpreting policy documents, a detailed picture of Sweden's posture and strategy towards China is rendered. However, it's essential to acknowledge the limitations of this approach. While this study provides an in-depth look into the unique case of Sweden-China relations, the results might not have a broader, universal applicability due to its specific focus. Also, the inherent

subjectivity of qualitative research could bring potential biases and assumptions, necessitating mindful measures for their identification and mitigation.

Despite these limitations, this study maintains transferability, or the potential applicability of its findings to different contexts or situations. Adhering to the principles outlined by Lincoln & Guba (1985), the research aspires to provide insights that, while specific to the Sweden-China context, can be useful for broader discussions on international relations, particularly in the design of effective strategies and policies for managing complex bilateral relationships. This is particularly relevant for situations involving diverse sources of social power, similar to the dynamics examined here between Sweden and China.

### *Justification for Case Study Research Design*

The choice of a single-case study as a research design for this thesis is justified because it is a flexible and holistic approach that allows for a comprehensive investigation of Sweden's relationship with China. A case study allows for a detailed and contextual analysis of specific situations, phenomena, or events, which makes a case study a very suitable choice for investigating complex factors in the relationship between Sweden and China (Yin, 2014).

Furthermore, a case study as a research design is suitable for this paper as it allows me to combine different data sources, such as interviews and policy documents, contributing to a more nuanced and robust understanding of the research questions (Yin, 2014). This design allows for studying how Sweden's relationship with China currently stands and how it may evolve.

To increase the credibility and reliability of this study, strategies such as triangulation and reflexivity were employed (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Tracy, 2010). Data collection involved selecting experts for interviews based on their expertise and experience in the field, and analysing a variety of policy documents, including official statements, reports, and guidelines issued by relevant Swedish authorities. Data triangulation entailed comparing and contrasting findings from expert interviews and policy document analysis to identify consistencies and discrepancies, allowing for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research topic (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Reflexivity required me as a researcher to continuously

reflect on the assumptions, biases, and potential influence on the research process, in order to minimize the impact of the preconceptions and enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

## 4.2 Data Collection

Data collection for this study is conducted using two primary methods: expert interviews and analysis of policy documents. Expert interviews are employed to gather in-depth and detailed information from individuals with particular expertise in a specific field (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). These interviews allow me to explore diverse perspectives and insights on Sweden's relationship with China and how this relationship may evolve in the future.

The document analysis focuses on reviewing policy documents concerning the Swedish stance and strategy towards China (Gross, 2018). This analysis includes examining various types of policy documents issued by relevant Swedish authorities. By selecting documents that represent different aspects of the Swedish authorities' approach to China, I want to gain a comprehensive understanding of how Sweden formulates and implements its policy in relation to China. These policy documents provide insights into the political and strategic context, complementing the data collected through interviews.

Utilizing both data collection methods allow for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of Sweden's relationship with China and contributes to a holistic understanding of the factors influencing the relationship. By combining expert interviews and document analysis, this study achieves a more robust and well-rounded examination of the subject matter, enhancing the reliability and validity of the research findings.

### 4.2.1 Expert Interviews: Purpose and Approach

Expert interviews serve as a research method that involves collecting data by engaging with individuals possessing expertise and knowledge in a given field. This strategy allows for a comprehensive understanding of complex and multifaceted issues, as the experts can offer distinctive perspectives and insights grounded in their theoretical knowledge and practical experience. The term 'expert interviews' is thus used to denote dialogues with professionals who occupy influential positions in a specific field (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

### *Expert Selection*

To obtain relevant information on Sweden-China relations, experts were identified and selected using purposive sampling based on their knowledge of Ideological, Economic, Military, or Political power (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Seven (7) experts, including academics, journalists, diplomats, security analysts, and economists, were selected for their professional expertise (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Robinson, 2014) (See Appendix 2). They were informed via email about the study's nature and assured of anonymity (See Appendix 3). Their diverse professional backgrounds and experiences contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the complex aspects of the bilateral relationship, thereby enhancing the study's validity and reliability (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). However, the sample may not capture all perspectives due to its size and the potential influence of personal views and experiences on the results.

### *Interview Structure*

A semi-structured interview approach was used to collect data from the experts. An interview guide (See Appendix 4) was created to ensure that all relevant topics and questions were covered during the interviews (Rapley, 2001). The interview guide included open-ended questions regarding Sweden's relationship with China and future trajectories for Sweden's relationship with China. The structure of the interview guide was based on Michael Mann's IEMP-model to ensure that I included all “sources of power” when interviewing.

The questions were flexible and adapted to each expert's specific knowledge and experience, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the topic. This approach also allowed for follow-up questions and discussions, favouring a more interactive and dynamic interview (Rapley, 2001).

### *Ethical Considerations and Interview Conduct*

Before conducting the interviews, participants were briefed regarding the study's purpose and their confidentiality rights, after which they provided informed consent to participate (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The right to withdraw at any time was explicitly stated. Conducted via Zoom in March and April 2023, the interviews were digitally recorded with consent, lasting between 35 and 70 minutes. Participants were reassured about their rights and confidentiality

to establish trust. The neutral and open-ended questions, including follow-ups questions, allowed me to clarify participants' perspectives. As experts, they were expected to confidently correct any misconceptions due to a more balanced power dynamic inherent in expert interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). As the interview process progressed, I adapted the guide to include emerging themes, while maintaining the overall structure. This flexibility allowed for richer data collection of the evolving themes in Sweden's relationship with China (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

#### 4.2.2 Policy Document analysis

##### *Policy Document Selection*

Document analysis, a standard research method in qualitative case studies, is a structured technique for the systematic scrutiny of policy documents in either paper or digital form (Gross, 2018). For this study, a systematic search of official sources and publications yielded nine (9) relevant policy documents relating to Sweden's relationship with China. The selection criteria centered around the document's relevance to the research questions and their significance to Swedish policy towards China. The documents analysed encompass official reports, strategies, and guidelines addressing various facets of the relationship between Sweden and China. It should be noted that this selection process, focusing on the most readily available documents, may potentially leave out critical perspectives or policy decisions. Additionally, my interpretation of the documents' content could introduce elements of bias into the analysis.

##### *Sources and Document Types*

This study draws upon policy documents from Swedish authorities and the government to construct a comprehensive view of Sweden's attitude and strategy towards China. The sources include official statements, reports, and strategy documents from the Swedish government, descriptions, and analyses of security issues from SÄPO, research reports and studies from Swedish Defence Research Agency (henceforth FOI) addressing military, technological and security policy aspects, and other pertinent materials from relevant authorities.



### *Criteria and Timeframe for Document Collection*

To ensure the relevance and timeliness of the policy documents used in the study, certain criteria and a specific timeframe were adopted.

Only policy documents published from 2019 onwards were included, as this marks the publication of the government's latest communication describing Sweden's approach to China (Skr. 2019/20:18). In addition, the documents must be relevant to Sweden's relationship with China and touch on topics defined by Michael Mann's theory. Non-relevant themes were excluded from the study. Finally, the analysis only included documents from Swedish authorities or the government to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the sources. This approach to document collection was designed to provide a representative sample of policy documents that provide a nuanced understanding of different aspects of Sweden's relationship with China.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis process consists of two primary components: thematic analysis of interview data and document analysis of policy documents.

#### *Transcription and Coding*

Following each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed to ensure the preservation of the participants' responses in their entirety and to facilitate the subsequent data analysis process. Ensuring the accuracy and completeness of transcriptions was essential for preserving the meaning of participants' responses.

Upon the completion of interviews, they were transcribed to facilitate data analysis. Once transcriptions were completed, the data was coded using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. This involved segmenting the text, which were then categorized and labeled according to emergent themes and concepts (See Appendix 1). This abductive analysis approach allowed for an iterative interaction between theory and data throughout the research process (Thompson, 2022). The initial categories were derived from theoretical assumptions, but they were later refined according to the collected data, enabling a coding process that incorporated both concept-driven and data-driven elements (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

### *Thematic Analysis of Interviews*

Through thematic analysis of the interview data, themes and patterns within the material were identified. This process involved meaning concentration, followed by a deeper meaning interpretation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). As a researcher, I acknowledge the co-construction of interview material between interviewer and respondents and the subsequent impact on the validity and reliability of the results. To ensure the integrity of the study, reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process by maintaining self-awareness and critically reflecting on assumptions (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Tracy, 2010).

### *Analysis of policy documents*

To conduct a thorough examination of policy documents from Swedish authorities related to my case study, document analysis was employed, as noted before, as the method of analysis. This approach involves a systematic review of textual material within the documents to identify, categorize, and analyse themes, concepts, and patterns relevant to the study (Gross, 2018). Relevant policy documents from Swedish authorities addressing relations with China were collected, including strategies, reports, and guidelines pertaining to the relationship's ideological, economic, military, and political dimensions. A preliminary review of the documents provided an overall understanding of the content and structure, which facilitated the identification of key themes and concepts.

### *Integrated Data Analysis*

After carrying out a thematic analysis of the interviews and a separate analysis of the policy documents, I will combine these analyses for each domain. The goal here is to look at both the interview data and the policy data at the same time. Doing so will help me gain a more in-depth and holistic understanding of Sweden's relationship with China.

To merge the insights from the interviews and the document analyses, I will identify and compare common themes and trends from both sets of data. This comparison will allow me to get a more complete picture of the relationship between Sweden and China. If I find any inconsistencies or conflicting points between the two data sets, I will carefully evaluate the

possible reasons for these discrepancies. I will then consider what these differences could mean for the final conclusions of my study.

## 5 Analysis

This analysis delves into the intricate and evolving relationship between Sweden and China, shedding light on its present status and potential future scenarios. Utilizing insights from expert interviews and policy documents, the analysis offers a comprehensive and nuanced comprehension of the dynamics in operation. These sources together provide an insight into their interactions across ideological, economic, military, and political domains.

### 5.1.1 Analysis of Ideological Power- Current Relationship

A central factor in the ideological power relationship between Sweden and China is the view on human rights and democracy, where the differences between the countries are significant and have led to a strained relationship. Over time, Sweden has shifted from a more naive approach towards China, where trade was hoped to drive political reform, to a more realistic strategy that involves promoting human rights issues through larger organizations such as the UN and the EU.

Some respondents noted that Sweden once adopted a more naive approach, hoping trade would facilitate human rights reforms in China. Respondent #1 mention:

*People once hoped that trading with China would reform the Communist Party and the country, steering it towards a more “Western” direction; however, most people have stopped believing in this notion today*

Instead, Sweden has toned down that hope and instead tries to push human rights issues through larger organizations like the UN or the EU. This strategy seems to have been chosen to avoid potential economic consequences of a more direct confrontation with China. Despite this, the government emphasizes that Sweden should always stand up for democratic principles and express criticism when they are lacking, including in China (Kristersson,

2022). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also stresses the importance of the EU's joint approach when it comes to addressing China's human rights violations (Billström, 2023). This is also highlighted in their report where Sweden will continue to play an active role in the EU's work on human rights in China (Utrikesdepartementet, 2022). This is a clear indication that Sweden will address human rights issues through the UN or EU, as it is unlikely that China will listen to Sweden individually.

Throughout all respondents, they see Sweden's current ideological relationship with China as very strained. This is based on several factors that have worsened the relationship between the countries. One is the case of Gui Minhai, who was already imprisoned in 2015, which has worsened the relationship between the countries, with Sweden repeatedly criticizing China for human rights violations. The case of Gui Minhai is mentioned by all respondents as a factor in the worsen relationship.

The government, also, points out that the case of Gui Minhai has had a negative impact on the relationship between Sweden and China, as described in SOU 2022:55. China is bound by obligations to respect civil and political rights, including the prohibition of torture and detention without a fair trial, according to the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights. These rights are central to the case of Gui Minhai, which involves politically motivated detentions in countries where the legal system is not independent of political power. SOU 2022:55 states that China is considered to be neither a rule of law nor a democracy and has significant shortcomings in terms of respect for human rights. These conditions have posed challenges for Sweden in seeking the release of Gui Minhai.

At the same time, there are risks in raising human rights in dialogue with China, as China has become less receptive to criticism and feedback on human rights. These risks include a damaged reputation and trust with China, which can affect bilateral relations. Respondent #4:

*China has always been a country that has not been particularly receptive to criticism or feedback from other countries about human rights. But we have seen in the past 10 years a development in China becoming even less acceptable, moving from not wanting to discuss it to getting very angry when someone brings it up (questions regarding human rights), one could say, in short*

Another factor that seems to have affect the relationship between the countries is China's alleged pressure on ethnic Uighurs and Tibetans in Sweden, as well as in China, which affects their political freedom and freedom of expression. This goes against Swedish values and further strains the relationship. Respondent #5:

*I have interviewed ethnic Uighurs and Tibetans who have been contacted by the Chinese Embassy (in Sweden) who have mentioned that they are being threatened, and that their families will be in trouble if they do not cooperate and spy*

This appears to exacerbate the already strained relationship between the countries, and there are known previous cases in Sweden where Chinese citizens have spied on exiled Chinese living in Sweden.

Finally, a recurring theme among the respondents is that the ideological relationship between the countries is rather weak. Respondent #3 describes it as follows:

*The dialogue with China is much weaker today, and this is partly because Sweden has raised the issue of human rights. So, it's clear that there are risks in talking about human rights with China*

In summary, the ideological relationship between Sweden and China is strained, primarily due to differing views on human rights and democracy. The hope of trade leading to political reform in China has been replaced by Sweden's strategy to address human rights issues via international bodies such as the UN and EU. Tensions have been further increased by the case of Gui Minhai and China's actions towards ethnic Uighurs and Tibetans in Sweden. The consensus among respondents is that the relationship is more tense than ever, posing risks for both nations.

### 5.1.2 Analysis of Ideological Power – Future Relationship

The analysis of the perception of Sweden's future ideological relationship with China reveals some common themes as well as differences. All respondents agreed on the need for Sweden to engage more proactively in human rights dialogues with China, emphasizing the

importance of continued cooperation, particularly with the EU, for effective pressure.

Respondents #4 mentions:

*Sweden needs to be proactive when looking at the risks ahead. I think that Sweden would like the relationship to improve, of course, but at what cost? The issues need to be raised at the EU level, so Sweden does not have to tackle them alone*

All respondents emphasized the importance of collaborating with the EU to address human rights issues in China, acknowledging that Sweden's influence alone might be insufficient. They believe that Sweden alone is too small to influence China and that a united approach would be more effective.

A common factor that emerges from these quotes is the importance of cooperation within the EU. This is to apply pressure more effectively on China, as Sweden alone is too small to have a significant influence over China, while avoiding risky confrontations with China. This is in line with both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the government priorities in EU work, where they highlight that Sweden should cooperate more closely with the EU on human rights issues in relation to China. This means a joint strategy to limit China's influence and defend human rights. This cooperation may ultimately help strengthen the EU's position against China, and thus Sweden's, and create greater pressure on China regarding human rights (Kristersson, 2022; Billström, 2023 Utrikesdepartementet, 2022).

There are differences in the answers of the respondents regarding how the relationship will be affected in the future. Respondent #2 notes that Sweden will continue to criticize China regarding human rights, as Sweden understands that there is a price to pay when driving such issues:

*But do you think Sweden will continue anyway? It's hard to see, but I think they will continue to criticize China regarding human rights... Sweden has been an outspoken critic of countries where they do not agree on these issues, and sometimes it backfires. This is a price that a moral actor like Sweden, traditionally, especially in relation to its size, is willing to pay*

Respondent #1 believes that Sweden will not drive certain issues, such as Taiwan and minority rights, as they do not want to be drawn into a new conflict with China:

*I don't think Sweden will push the Taiwan issue very hard in the future. But of course, we (Sweden) could get involved there, and would have to side with Taiwan since it is a democracy. But I think that Sweden would prefer not to discuss the Taiwan issue unnecessarily, as they do not want to be drawn into more conflicts*

While respondent #2 suggests that Sweden will continue to criticize China on human rights issues, acknowledging the potential backlash, respondent #1 argues that Sweden may avoid pushing certain topics like Taiwan and minority rights to prevent further conflicts.

To conclude, Sweden's future ideological relationship with China is expected to focus on proactive engagement in human rights dialogues, with cooperation through the EU being vital. This collective approach is considered more effective due to Sweden's limited influence alone. Respondents diverge on whether Sweden will continue to criticize China on sensitive issues like human rights, recognizing potential repercussions, or refrain from raising certain topics such as Taiwan and minority rights to avoid conflicts. In the future, Sweden's relationship with China will hinge on balancing its advocacy for human rights and democracy with its political interests, greatly facilitated by EU collaboration.

### 5.2.1 Analysis of Economic Power- Current Relationship

Sweden's economic relationship with China is complex and multifaceted. Despite the challenges, this analysis indicates that the relationship is generally positive and offers substantial benefits, such as job creation and economic stimulation. However, the risks inherent in China's economic power and strategic investments in Swedish companies are not to be overlooked. In the following analysis, the current economic relationship between Sweden and China will be dissected, focusing on the opportunities and risks this relationship presents and exploring strategies Sweden can employ to navigate these challenges effectively, maintaining a constructive and rewarding relationship with China.

To begin, Sweden's economic dependence on China is a crucial factor to consider. Respondents #1 and #2 both emphasize the importance of maintaining a healthy economic relationship with China. They highlight how Chinese investments, specifically the ownership of Volvo, have contributed significantly to job creation in Sweden. Furthermore, they suggest

that Sweden's economic exposure to China, while significant, is not as extreme as that of some other countries which could offer a level of protection against the risks associated with over-reliance on a single foreign economy.

Moving onto the FOI's report, where they emphasize the vast impact of Chinese investments in Sweden, particularly highlighting Geely's acquisition of Volvo. Although initially not a large monetary investment, it has become an economic and social force within the country, employing over 23,000 people. The report indicates that the control exerted by this Chinese company, linked to the state, over a crucial Swedish business exposes Sweden's vulnerability and potential influence of China via strategic investments (Almén & Weidacher Hsiung, 2022). These insights underline the importance of Sweden maintaining a balanced trade relationship with China, considering the broad spectrum of Chinese investments that play a critical role in creating jobs in Sweden. However, both respondents and the FOI report emphasise that Sweden is diversified from Chinese investment and that it does not currently pose a major threat.

When it comes to the economic relationship between Sweden and China, the majority of respondents [1,2,3,4] maintain a generally positive view. However, one respondent's opinion deviates from this perception. Respondent #7 believes that Sweden's economic relationship with China is more strained than ever, partly due to economic dependence:

*Sweden's economic relationship with China today is more strained than ever, and why do I say that? Well, the economic aspects are so important, and we (Sweden) have put ourselves in a relatively bad situation where on the one hand, we are trying to address human rights issues with China, but at the same time, we don't want to become enemies with China and lose trade with them*

Despite the generally positive outlook, there are significant concerns about potential risks. Trade with China offers opportunities in the form of creating jobs and stimulating the economy. At the same time, trade with China involves potential risks. These include possible connections to the Chinese state and technology falling into the hands of China's military. The FOI report, regarding Chinese acquisitions in Sweden, mentions that Chinese corporate acquisitions in Sweden today can pose security threats and that Sweden needs to be vigilant against potential knowledge transfer and technology theft (Hellström et al., 2019).



Corroborating these concerns, respondent voices echo these fears. This can be seen as an obstacle to a constructive relationship with China, as it indicates that there is a risk of China using its economic influence to harm Sweden economically and in terms of security.

Respondent #6 also mentions that there are risks associated with Chinese investments:

*Of course, there are risks with Chinese investments. It can open up avenues for pressure from the Chinese state*

Building on this point, Respondent #5 provides more specific examples when highlighting where Chinese investments in Swedish companies are strategic investments by the Chinese state, in line with the FOI report (Hellström et al., 2019). These investments are strategic in that China seeks to develop its technology sector and become a world leader. According to respondent #5, this type of investment has not only damaged the relationship between Sweden and China, but also between West and East:

*There have been investments that have gone through; China bought two Swedish semiconductor companies that nobody talks about. What are the implications for the current relationship? However, I think that Sweden has recently become more cautious about Chinese investments, which has obviously hampered the relationship*

These concerns are not only shared by individuals but also echoed in official reports. The 2022 MUST Report highlights that China absorbs foreign technology through strategic acquisitions – serving both civilian and military purposes (MUST, 2022). This can affect Sweden's current relationship with China, as mistrust towards Chinese investments increases, and the willingness for economic cooperation decreases.

The Government does not fully share this mistrust in 2019/20:18. They mention that Sweden and China have benefited from their collaboration in innovation, trade, and research, resulting in technological advancements and increased competitiveness for both nations. Instead, the government suggest that to mitigate security risks and technology transfer concerns, Sweden can enhance transparency in its investment process, potentially implementing stricter regulations and scrutinizing foreign investments in strategic assets or sensitive technology. By better understanding Chinese companies' ownership and connections to the Chinese state, Sweden can make informed decisions regarding investment approvals.

Despite challenges, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs stresses the importance of ongoing collaborations with China in trade and climate issues, which constitute common interests aiding in maintaining a sustainable economic power balance (Billström, 2023). To mitigate China's economic power risks, Sweden may also foster partnerships with countries sharing similar interests and concerns. Within the EU framework, Sweden can collaborate with other member states to create strategies and policies for addressing these risks. These strategies include common rules for foreign investments, mechanisms to safeguard critical infrastructure and technology, and collective efforts to uphold a rules-based international order.

In summary, the relationship between Sweden and China is largely positive despite its complexities. It offers substantial benefits but also risks associated with the potential influence and control exerted by Chinese state-connected companies. Mitigating these challenges may require enhanced investment process transparency and cooperation within the EU to develop common strategies addressing the risks posed by China's economic influence.

### 5.2.2 Analysis of Economic Power- Future Relationship

In a world characterized by increased geopolitical tensions and rapid technological development, Sweden faces the challenge of navigating its economic relationship with China. In the following analysis, the future economic relationship will be presented and how various factors may affect Sweden's economic ties to China.

To begin with, many respondents [1,2,3,5,6,7] concur that the future of Sweden's economic relationship with China is unpredictable considering geopolitical factors, particularly the conflict between the US and China, could have profound implications for the Swedish economy due to its extensive cooperation with both countries.

In this context, the Government emphasises in Skr. 2019/20:18 that Sweden's economic relations with China may change due to China's economic growth and the increased trade between the countries. The government highlights that future scenarios include continued economic cooperation, but there is a risk of global trade conflicts that could affect Sweden's relationship with China. Respondents #3, #6, and #7 all stress the significant role of

geopolitical aspects in shaping Sweden's economic relationship with China. They assert that the relationship is affected by multiple geopolitical events, such as the US-China trade relationship and the EU's position in this conflict. Further, they emphasize that increased military cooperation between China and Russia could potentially impact Sweden's ability to trade key exports.

These geopolitical factors, including China's political ambitions and potential conflicts with other global powers, present both risks and opportunities to Sweden. On one hand, they could jeopardize Sweden's economic and security interests. On the other, they could open doors for increased trade and cooperation, especially in research and technology sectors.

Despite these challenges, respondents [3,4,5,6] envision positive prospects for future economic relations, albeit with an increased sense of caution in trade engagements with China. Respondent #4 explains briefly:

*So, yes, I think the economic cooperation will be there, but there will be more caution if you understand what I mean*

The respondents indicate that Sweden will maintain a good economic relationship with China, despite reduced naivety. At the same time, the potential for increased cooperation in research and technology is emphasized, which could improve economic ties between the countries. Particularly in areas such as the automotive industry and the green transition.

Respondent #7:

*Often people highlight, for example, the green transition in society. Where both Sweden and China are prominent and can co-operate. Then people often talk about the automotive industry. Both the electrification of vehicles and vehicle technology development, China is quite advanced in these areas. Even within certain types of digital services, the market is very advanced in China, so there are opportunities. Swedish companies can benefit from increased commercial cooperation with China*

Building upon the optimism surrounding potential cooperation areas, it is worth noting some other important future scenarios. The FOI report points to a future scenario in which Sweden will be more cautious about Chinese investments but will seek partnerships in areas that align with Sweden's economic interests and values. This can be seen as a future strategy to

maintain a constructive relationship with China economically while protecting Sweden's security interests (Hellström et al., 2019).

To underline the significance of this approach, official documents support this stance. MUST highlights this in its annual report, stating that there will be greater vigilance towards Chinese investments and economic cooperation (MUST, 2022). Also, FOI highlights Sweden's increased awareness of the risks associated with China's economic influence, and that this is most likely to lead to reduced Chinese investments in Sweden (Almén & Weidacher Hsiung, 2022). These policy documents emphasize a change in Sweden's attitude towards China, where the country becomes more cautious and risk-aware while seeking cooperation opportunities that are compatible with national interests and values.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that the future of Sweden's economic relationship with China is uncertain and heavily influenced by geopolitical events, such as the conflict between the US and China, the EU's position in this conflict, and China's relationship with Russia. Despite this, a picture emerges that Sweden is likely to maintain a good economic relationship with China, even though naivety towards the country has decreased. There is also a clear expectation that future collaborations will be characterized by greater caution and vigilance.

### 5.3.1 Analysis of Military Power – Current Relationship

The security aspects of the relationship between Sweden and China are complex and touch upon a variety of areas, such as military activity, technological development, economic influence, and critical infrastructure. In this analysis, I will explore how these security aspects interact and affect each other, as well as how they shape the overall relationship between the countries.

First of all, due to the vast geographical differences, most respondents do not see China as a direct military threat. Respondent #4 suggests that geographical distances make China's military activity less of a direct threat to Sweden. However, Respondent #2 raises the issue of the Arctic and that China's attempts to influence the region, and that it may have affected the relationship between the countries.

FOI's report emphasizes the potential of cooperation in the Arctic and how it has promoted the relationship between the countries (Almén & Weidacher Hsiung, 2022). On the other hand, MUST points out that China has strategic interests in the Arctic have made the relationship between the countries more tense today (MUST, 2022). SÄPO also shares MUST's view (SÄPO, 2023). While FOI's report emphasizes the potential of cooperation and how it can promote the relationship between the countries, MUST and SÄPO's views focus on China's strategic interests in the region, which has created tensions. This provides a broader picture of the current situation and highlights various opportunities and challenges for Sweden in dealing with China's actions in the Arctic. China's increased interest in the Arctic can be linked to the country's desire to secure access to natural resources, as well as exploit the potential shipping route through the Arctic as an alternative to existing trade routes. Understanding these interests and how they interact with other security aspects is crucial for managing the overall relationship between the countries today.

Turning to another relevant aspect of these interactions, examining the implications of China's technological progress for global power dynamics. This point is highlighted by respondent #2, who emphasizes that China's access to cutting-edge technology not only bolsters their military capabilities but also alters the global balance of power.

*“The risks with China lie more in the access they have to technology, which has strengthened Chinese military capacity.”*

This technological strength and its threats are echoed in concerns about cyber attacks, espionage, and surveillance. China's access to and development of technology is a critical security concern, with respondents [1,3,5,6,7] and reports from SÄPO and MUST highlighting increased activities in military technology as a significant factor in the growing tension between the countries. They note that China's advanced technology strengthens its military capacity and affects the global balance of power, with concerns surrounding cyber activities, espionage, and surveillance. These activities pose a threat to Sweden's territorial sovereignty and independent decision-making, creating mistrust and tensions between the countries (SÄPO, 2023; MUST, 2022).

Despite the threats of cyber attacks and infiltration, espionage is primarily cited as the biggest problem in the relationship by several respondents. They mention that China spies for various reasons, including monitoring Chinese people in exile and stealing state secrets. Respondent

#6 identifies espionage and the gathering of state secrets as key security issues affecting Sweden's relationship with China. These activities, including the surveillance of exiled Chinese citizens in Sweden, increase tensions between the countries. These security risk areas are recurring themes from several respondents [1,2,3,5,6,7]. Also, these factors have led to Sweden being more suspicious of China today than before. With this backdrop of suspicion, it's worth examining specific incidents that have strained the relationship, such as the Huawei 5G case.

The Huawei 5G rollout case, which spans economy, military, and politics domains, is highlighted by respondent #4 as a key event that negatively impacted the relationship. The Swedish decision to exclude Huawei due to security risks has strained the relationship with China, leading to notable economic consequences. This is also discernible in the FOI report, which states that the decision to ban Huawei and ZTE from participating in the 5G development in Sweden has led to a deteriorated relationship between Sweden and China (Almén & Weidacher Hsiung, 2022). The decision to stop Huawei from the 5G rollout had significant consequences for Swedish companies. Ericsson reported a 60 percent drop in sales in China after the decision. China's reaction to the decision shows that technological issues

FOI reports highlight that China General Nuclear (CGN) owns about 2% of Sweden's total annual energy production. While this stake is not substantial enough to significantly alter Sweden's overall electricity production, it does provide CGN access to crucial Swedish power system technology (Almén & Weidacher Hsiung, 2022). Such ownership can potentially present security threats and risk knowledge and technology transfer (Hellström et al., 2019). Acknowledging this, the Swedish Government urges careful evaluation of security risks in all forms of cooperation with Chinese entities, including investments and academic exchanges (Skr. 2019/20:18). Ownership of Chinese companies, such as CGN, in Swedish firms grants them access to critical technology and can potentially pose a threat to Swedish security and sovereignty. This has led to increased awareness of the risks associated with Chinese investments and a call from the government to consider security risks when collaborating with Chinese actors.

All in all, the multifaceted security aspects of the Sweden-China relationship often interact in complex ways, shaping the overall relationship. Understanding these connections is crucial to navigate and manage challenges effectively. By considering security risks in cooperation with

China, Sweden can ensure a relationship that benefits both countries and contributes to stability.

### 5.3.2 Analysis of Military Power- Future Relationship

In this analysis, I will provide indications of Sweden's future military relationship with China, highlighting in particular that geopolitical developments and links between China and Russia will be crucial to the future relationship between the two countries.

Several respondents [1,3,4,5,6,7] emphasize the geopolitical developments as the single most important issue for Sweden's future military power relationship with China. These geopolitical developments include the ongoing rivalry between the United States and China, increased Chinese military presence, and China's expanding influence in international organizations. Understanding these developments is crucial for Sweden to anticipate potential security challenges and adapt its military strategy accordingly. Respondent #4 highlights what almost all respondents mentioned:

*I believe that the most important factor to examine closely in the future is the geopolitical development between Sweden, China, and the United States. We must be aware that values and political systems do not always go hand in hand and that each country has its own priorities and interests in global cooperation. We saw this during the Cold War*

Drawing from this, Sweden's military ties with China hinge on the evolving U.S.-China relationship. Collaborations with the U.S. can incite tension with China, perceiving it as a threat. Sweden's stance, aligning more with the U.S. or adopting neutrality, will affect its relationship with China. The Swedish government emphasizes cooperation within the European Union and with like-minded countries to collectively address security and defence challenges posed by China's rising influence, especially in transatlantic contexts (Skr. 2019/20:18).

Moving onto another dimension of the issue, some respondents [1,3,7] expressed concern about the connection between China and Russia. Particularly important is understanding how China's close cooperation with Russia may create new security threats for Sweden, especially

if China takes a more active role in Russia's conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, and their closer cooperation on Arctic issues. Respondent #1 states:

*We have the Arctic, which I believe is an important issue where China really wants to have more influence and impact in the region. There are many advantages to the region: natural resources, shorter shipping routes. So, there are both security and economic interests. We will see if China's rapprochement with Russia will have any consequences. We have seen that they have closer cooperation now than before*

Building on the concerns about the international geopolitical landscape, the Arctic has become an increasingly important region on the international stage, both from an economic and security policy perspective (MUST, 2022). China has shown a growing interest in the region, which has led to collaborations with Russia in both research and infrastructure projects. This could have long-term security policy implications for Sweden, as a strengthened relationship between China and Russia in the Arctic could mean increased tensions and competition in the region. FOI also highlights that China has approached Russia, largely due to China's desire to enter the Arctic (Almén & Weidacher Hsiung, 2022). This could, in turn, affect Sweden's security and ability to influence developments in the Arctic, as well as how the country positions itself in relation to both China and Russia.

On top of these geopolitical considerations, SÄPO and MUST point out Russia, China, and Iran as significant security threats to Sweden in the shifting global landscape. While Russia is seen as the largest single threat, China's extensive and systematic espionage and influence attempts have identified it as an escalating long-term security concern (SÄPO, 2023; MUST, 2022; Skr. 2019/20:18). Thus, Sweden must remain watchful and proactive to ensure national security and sovereignty, continuously adjusting its security policy to meet and counter China's potential risks and threats.

It is also interesting to examine how Sweden's relationship with China may be affected by a potential Swedish NATO membership. Opinions among respondents on how a possible Swedish NATO membership would affect the relationship vary. While some believe it could negatively affect relations with China [1,4,5], others point out China's good relations with several NATO members [2,3,7]. Respondent #2 states:



*I do not think we see any signs that China attaches great importance to it anyway (NATO entry). They have always regarded Sweden as part of the West. So, no significant impact. They (China) have good relations with several NATO countries*

Regardless of how a potential NATO membership might affect the relationship, it is crucial that Sweden prepares to handle potential security-related challenges associated with China's growing engagement in the region.

Despite the differing views and potential challenges, the government highlights that although Sweden and China have differing views on security policy and international relations, there is room for collaboration in addressing common global security challenges, such as climate change, terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Skr. 2019/20:18). By cooperating in these areas, both countries can benefit from each other's knowledge and resources in the future, in turn contributing to improved relations and a more stable global security environment. FOI suggests that Sweden, in the future, should develop a balanced strategy towards China, remaining vigilant against security threats while simultaneously seeking cooperation in areas of shared interests (Hellström et al., 2019).

In summary, the future of Sweden's military relationship with China is multifaceted, shaped by geopolitical dynamics, domestic security concerns, and potential alliances. The ongoing U.S.-China rivalry, China's increased military presence, and expanding influence in international organizations all pose implications for Sweden. Furthermore, China's close cooperation with Russia, particularly in the Arctic region, presents additional security threats for Sweden. Despite these potential challenges, opportunities for collaboration exist in addressing global security issues. Whether Sweden's potential NATO membership would affect its relationship with China is debatable.

#### 5.4.1 Analysis of Political Power- Current Relationship

This analysis examines the current diplomatic situation in the relationship between the two countries by examining the events and factors that have influenced the diplomatic dynamics. Among the most prominent factors is the Gui Minhai case.

A majority of respondents highlight a deterioration over time in Sweden's diplomatic relationship with China, often describing it as strained or poor. A contributing factor to this is the case of Gui Minhai, the Swedish citizen who is imprisoned in China. Several respondents [1,2,5,6] identified this as the fundamental issue in the diplomatic relationship. Respondent #1 explains what most respondent said:

*It is a significant underlying problem. As long as Gui Minhai remains imprisoned, it will likely continue to be so... A large number of people in Sweden view China negatively. I think Sweden is one of the countries in the EU, perhaps the country in the EU with the most negative view of China*

The government also addresses the case of Gui Minhai in several policy documents, which continues to be a bilateral issue and creates tensions between Sweden and China. They emphasize that Sweden needs to navigate this issue carefully to try to resolve the situation without further worsening the diplomatic relationship. It is stressed that China is an important global actor, and therefore it is essential for Sweden to maintain a well-functioning diplomatic relationship with the country (SOU 2022:55; Skr. 2019/20:18).

Despite the challenges and tensions characterizing the diplomatic relationship between Sweden and China, it is evident that Sweden continues to work on maintaining and improving its ties with China. To manage these challenges, the Swedish government has adapted its strategy and focused on collaborating more within the EU concerning diplomatic matters involving China. This is clearly evident in the government's policy that emphasizes the need for an increasing number of diplomatic affairs to be conducted through the EU. This strategy seeks to enhance Sweden's position by fostering collaboration with other European countries and establishing a united front (SOU 2022:55; Skr. 2019/20:18; Kristersson, 2022). According to Respondent #3, Sweden's attempts to act more within the EU in recent years have helped ease diplomatic tensions.

*My impression is that in recent years, Sweden has often stated that it acts within the EU, and that many issues are raised from there rather than individually. This has led to a better relationship today than just a few years ago*

Having discussed Sweden's efforts to act more within the EU and ease tensions in the diplomatic relationship with China, it is important to emphasize how China's stance has also

changed. This change in Sweden's approach has been mirrored in China's attitude toward Sweden and the EU at large. Respondent #3 and #7 notes that China now prefers to address the EU rather than Sweden explicitly on many issues. According to Respondent #7:

*In the past, it was easy for top officials to gain access to other top officials in China, but today it is virtually impossible... the relations are strained, and it is precisely because, today there are other values at stake than just 10-15 years ago. China's dependence on Sweden is minimal, almost non-existent today, while our dependence on China is increasing*

A majority of respondents [1,2,4,5,7] state that the diplomatic relationship between Sweden and China has deteriorated in recent years, and that it has become more challenging to gain access to Chinese top officials. Respondent #4, however, emphasizes that Sweden is an outlier in having worse relations than many other EU countries. Respondent 4 expresses concerns about the political events that have affected the relationship between Sweden and China, indicating that there is anxiety about whether Sweden's changed strategy will be sufficiently effective in improving the situation:

*Yes, precisely. I believe that the reason for the relationship being as it is mainly depending on two factors: the case of Minhai and the Swedish decision not to allow Huawei in the expansion of telecommunications. These are the two single most important political events affecting the framework of the relationship*

In summary, Sweden's current diplomatic relationship with China is predominantly viewed as strained, with the incarceration of Swedish citizen Gui Minhai in China considered a significant issue. Despite this, Sweden strives to maintain and improve its ties with China by focusing on EU-based collaboration on diplomatic matters, thereby strengthening its position. China's approach has mirrored this shift, preferring to engage with the EU rather than Sweden on many issues. However, respondents express concern about the deteriorating access to Chinese top officials and question the effectiveness of Sweden's new strategy.

#### 5.4.2 Analysis of Political Power- Future Relationship

In this analysis, I examine potential future scenarios for Sweden's diplomatic relations with China, focusing on various perspectives from respondents and policy documents. It is evident that the Gui Minhai case clearly plays a crucial role in the future relations between the two countries.

A recurring theme among several respondents is that as long as Gui Minhai remains imprisoned, the diplomatic relations will continue to be strained in the future. However, respondents #2 and #6 believe that relations may improve in the future with the new Chinese ambassador. Respondent #6 mentions:

*The relationship between Sweden and China has changed over time and was previously more positive. China seems to want to reduce the level of conflict, but this occurs mainly at a superficial level rather than through concrete changes in their policy... This can be seen with the new Chinese ambassador (in Sweden). He seems to have a different attitude than his predecessor; this could potentially be positive for the relationship in the future. Who knows?*

In contrast to the optimism of respondents #2 and #6, respondents #1 and #3 adopt a more sceptical view. These respondents emphasize that the fundamental causes of tensions in the relationship extend beyond individual cases and may be more difficult to overcome.

Respondent #1 notes:

*I don't think it [relationship] will become particularly warm in the years to come. That is, the diplomatic relations will not get better... but of course, from Sweden's point of view, one could imagine that if China releases Minhai, things will get better. But why should China do that for Sweden? [...] But it is also difficult to see any significant change considering recent years, and there is no shift at the top (Xi Jinping), for example. But I don't think it will return to good relations again; I think it will remain rather weak moving forward, and that also has to do with China becoming more and more authoritarian at its core*

Both respondents #1 and #3 point to China's growing authoritarian stance and question why China should make concessions for Sweden in the future. This line of reasoning suggests that

it may be difficult for Sweden to maintain constructive dialogue with China and that diplomatic relations can be expected to remain strained in the future. However, despite this scepticism, policy documents suggest possible avenues to mitigate these tensions.

Policy documents from the government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs underscore the potential of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in mitigating diplomatic tensions. They suggest that long-term cooperation in areas such as climate change and sustainable development could improve future diplomatic relations (Skr. 2019/20:18; Kristersson, 2022; Billström, 2023).

This potential for cooperation, as mentioned in the policy documents, is where the possibility of defrosting the cool relationship comes in. It is beneficial for Sweden's future diplomatic relationship with China, as it can lead to increased understanding and cooperation between the countries. By focusing on shared challenges and interests, such as climate change, both countries can benefit from each other's expertise and resources to address these global issues (Billström, 2023). Closer cooperation in these areas can also build trust and create a better foundation for dealing with more sensitive issues. This could foster a more constructive dialogue and help to alleviate tensions in the diplomatic relationship.

Building on the theme of cooperation, the Government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also emphasise the importance of Sweden promoting the development of a future joint strategy and coordination between Western countries (Kristersson, 2022; Utrikesdepartementet, 2022). This is to strengthen their negotiating position vis-à-vis China in the future and facilitate a constructive dialogue on common interests and challenges, such as climate change.

Despite these strategic approaches to improve the relationship, the future remains uncertain. Respondent #5 is ambivalent about predicting the future relationship. While the Swedish government desires a better relationship with China, it may improve, but the respondent remains uncertain:

*It is difficult to predict how diplomatic relations between Sweden and China will develop in the future. The Gui Minhai case is an important factor affecting the relationship, but it is only one of several aspects. The current Swedish government*

*has expressed a desire to improve relations with China, which may contribute to a positive development*

In summary, the future diplomatic relations between Sweden and China are uncertain due to factors such as the Gui Minhai case and China's authoritarian rule. While some predict improvements with the new Chinese ambassador, others highlight persistent tensions. Policy documents suggest mitigating these tensions through cooperation on common global challenges and a unified Western strategy towards China, emphasizing the complexity and unpredictability of the situation.

## 6 Discussion

In this chapter, I will discuss and reflect upon how the findings from the study address the previously presented research questions concerning Sweden's relationship with China.

The main research question of this study was, *How has Sweden managed its interests (in terms of Michael Mann's economic, political, military, and ideological domains) in its evolving relationship with China?* To answer this, I paid particular attention to the different dynamics and influential factors that have shaped this relationship.

Sweden has managed to maintain its interests in the ideological and political domains, despite significant challenges. Incidents such as the Gui Minhai case and China's treatment of Uighurs and Tibetans brought Sweden's ideological differences with China. These challenges have forced Sweden to strike a delicate balance, to cultivate a constructive relationship with China without compromising its core principles and values.

In addition to bilateral interactions, Sweden's engagements with EU and other international organizations have been instrumental in managing these ideological differences. The use of multilateral platforms allows Sweden to engage in constructive discussions with China without directly provoking confrontation. It also offers a viable route that aligns with Sweden's principles and values, illuminating a promising potential for further engagement in these domains.

Moving to the economic and military domains, Sweden's partnerships and alliances have played significant roles in shaping the bilateral relationship. This involves engaging in economic partnerships and security alliances with other nations to navigate the challenges these domains present. Such strategies have the potential to build trust, decrease tensions, and promote a more constructive relationship with China, all while managing the complex and sensitive geopolitical landscape.

The first subordinate research question asks, *What key dynamics and influencing factors have shaped Sweden's success in maintaining its interests across these four domains in its relationship with China?* To answer this, I delve into the complex interplay between the four domains. Economic cooperation often opens channels for conversations on political and ideological differences, demonstrating the overlapping of these domains. For instance, the potential gains from trade and investment could drive Sweden to engage more robustly with China on sensitive political issues. Likewise, shared political or ideological perspectives could create a conducive environment for economic collaboration. Understanding these is essential to grasp the nuances of Sweden's strategy.

Sweden's approach embodies the complexity and sophistication required to navigate international relations. Its ability to seize opportunities across domains to safeguard its overall interests reflects a high level of strategic smartness. For instance, Sweden leverages its economic relationships to foster dialogue about human rights, signalling its commitment to ideological principles while maintaining constructive engagement with China.

Responding to the second subordinate research question, *How has Sweden adapted its strategies in these four domains in response to changes in its relationship with China?* requires a focus on Sweden's strategic adaptability. Sweden's capability to navigate complex dynamics, even in the face of China's ambitions in the Arctic and its growing ties with Russia, underscore the country's strategic flexibility. With the Arctic region becoming a critical focal point due to climate change and its potential to open new sea routes and access to untapped resources, Sweden has understood the importance of constructive engagement and cooperation with China.

This strategy of cooperation, however, is not without its challenges and risks. For instance, Sweden must remain cautious about China's potential ambitions in the region. This has prompted concerns over the potential for geopolitical tensions, as China's interests in the

region could potentially clash with those of the Arctic states. Moreover, China's growing ties with Russia, another significant player in the Arctic, further complicate the dynamics. Sweden has to navigate this potential bilateral alliance while also managing its own interests in the region.

As emphasized by MUST (2022) and SÄPO (2023), the geopolitical complexities in the Arctic require a strategic approach. This approach should strike a delicate balance between fostering cooperation on shared interests and ensuring the safeguarding of national and regional interests. The constant evaluation and, when necessary, the adaptation of Sweden's approach is critical to ensuring that its Arctic strategy remains effective and responsive to these rapidly evolving dynamics.

The third subordinate research question moves us into potential future scenarios, *Based on current trends and influences, how might Sweden continue to maintain its interests in its future relationship with China across these four domains?* This question invites speculation, but it's crucial to acknowledge that the objective is not to predict the future with certainty. Instead, based on current trends, ideological and political differences will likely continue to pose challenges, leading to possible tensions. However, the opportunity for continuous collaboration, particularly within the EU and other international alliances, could serve as a valuable strategy for Sweden to manage these challenges and maintain its interests.

Multilateral collaborations could become even more significant in the future. Offering opportunities for mutual growth and understanding while helping to mitigate risks and conflicts. Sweden could leverage these collaborations to maintain and enhance its constructive relationship with China, especially by focusing on areas of mutual interest like technology or climate change research.

Furthermore, Sweden's strategic use of its EU membership and other international alliances to influence China's behaviour is essential. These alliances should not be seen only as tools for coercion but as ways to foster harmonious international relationships.

Lastly, the policy implications of these potential future scenarios need consideration. This research could contribute to the development of balanced policies that protect Sweden's interests while recognizing potential areas for cooperation and mutual growth. A future relationship between Sweden and China, rooted in dialogue, mutual respect, and shared



benefits, can be constructive and mutually beneficial, setting an example for international diplomacy.

## 7 Conclusions

The evolving of Sweden's relationship with China across the four domains of social power, as proposed by Michael Mann, forms the core of this study. Interviews and policy documents have offered a layered understanding of this intricate relationship, highlighting the ever-changing significance of these domains and the resultant complexities and tensions.

The ideological domain revealed major differences between Sweden and China's perspectives on human rights and democracy, impacting the relationship's trajectory. Sweden's approach to address these issues has largely been through multilateral platforms and collaborations with other countries. However, the interview data highlighted the need for a pragmatic approach in Sweden's foreign policy towards China, which implies balancing the defence of its values with constructive collaborations in areas of mutual interest.

The economic domain presented a mix of challenges and opportunities. The influencing factors, such as risks related to Chinese investments and technology transfers, and the impact of geopolitical factors, constitute the obstacles. On the other side, the potential for economic growth and job creation through trade with China, along with the possibility of increased collaboration in research and technology, represent the opportunities. The results emphasize that focusing on shared interests, such as trade, innovation, research, and climate issues, is crucial to maintaining a dynamic economic relationship.

The military domain portrayed a similar mix of barriers and possibilities. Dynamics such as China's expanding military capabilities, espionage, cyberattacks, Arctic interests, and investments in critical infrastructure have exacerbated mistrust and tension. Simultaneously, there exist spaces for collaboration on shared challenges like Arctic affairs, climate change, and technological development. These suggest that despite the challenges, multilateral collaborations and shared objectives may provide an avenue for productive engagement between Sweden and China.

The political domain's trajectory has been marked by a decline, evidenced by the deterioration in Sweden's diplomatic ties with China. In particular, the Gui Minhai case has exacerbated tensions. However, Sweden's strategic focus on cooperation within the EU has been a key factor in addressing these political stressors. Although the future trajectory in this domain, as hinted by respondents, leans towards the pessimistic side, the appointment of a new Chinese ambassador provides a potential pivot point for improvements.

The interaction between the four domains greatly affects the development of Sweden's relationship with China. The analysis shows that the importance of these domains varies, with the economic and ideological domains currently dominating, while the political and military aspects are increasing. This study reinforces Mann's concept of social power and shows how a mix of these domains provides a nuanced picture of the relationship and emphasises the importance of a balanced, strategic policy for Sweden to navigate this complexity.

A key strategy moving forward is for Sweden to capitalize on its EU membership and other international alliances, using these platforms not as a tool of coercion, but to foster more harmonious international relationships. Areas of mutual interest, such as technology and climate change research, present opportunities for constructive collaboration. Sweden should also focus on maintaining pressure on China regarding human rights and democracy. This can be balanced with protecting national interests and economic prosperity. The complexity highlighted in this study also demonstrates the importance of a strategic approach, one that adapts to the changing dynamics of the four domains.

This study, thus, confirms the utility of Mann's framework for understanding the complexities of changing power relations. Building on the domains, this study illustrates how a wide array of factors, varying in importance over time, shape the relationship between Sweden and China. These factors underscore the complexities inherent in international relations, and more specifically, the relationship between these two nations.

Lastly, there are several potential areas for future research. However, it would be interesting to examine how Sweden and other European countries approach their relationships with China. Such a study could reveal similarities and differences in strategies, and challenges, and provide insight into the most effective methods for maintaining healthy and fruitful connections with China. This could contribute to a better understanding of how European

countries can cooperate and learn from one another in managing their relations with China more effectively.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1

#### *Code book*

It is important to note that each code in the coding scheme is treated in terms of both current and future scenarios. This means that the analysis focuses on how the experts perceive Sweden's relationship with China today, as well as how the experts believe the relationship may develop in the future.

The coding scheme focused on Sweden's relationship with China:

1. Ideological power 1.1. Swedish values and beliefs 1.2. Differences in views on human rights and democracy 1.3. Opinions on China's political system
2. Economic power 2.1. Trade between Sweden and China 2.2. Chinese investments in Sweden 2.3. Collaborations in research and technology 2.4. Economic pressures and conflicts
3. Military power 3.1. Security policy aspects and risks 3.2. Geopolitical aspects 3.3. Espionage and counter-espionage 3.4. Cyber threats and technological surveillance
4. Political power 4.1. Swedish diplomacy and political relations with China 4.2. Influence on international organizations and cooperative agreements 4.3. Management of conflicts

Using this coding scheme, I structured and categorised the analysis based on observations and conclusions from the interviews.

### Appendix 2

#### Respondents

Number	Profession	Data type	Method	Approx. Experience	Purpose
1	Economist	Qualitative	Expert interview	20y	Gain insight into trade and bilateral business
2	Analyst, Security	Qualitative	Expert interview	15y	Analyse defence and security issues
3	Diplomat	Qualitative	Expert interview	40y	Understand political relations
4	Analyst, External threats	Qualitative	Expert interview	15y	Evaluate security aspects
5	Journalist	Qualitative	Expert interview	20y	Broad knowledge of differences between Sweden - China
6	Journalist	Qualitative	Expert interview	10y	Examine human rights
7	Economist	Qualitative	Expert interview	25y	Gain insight into the economy

### **Appendix 3**

#### ***E-Mail (Translated from Swedish)***

Hello,

I am a student at the Department of Political Science in Gothenburg, and I am writing a master's thesis on Sweden's complex relationship with China and the future scenarios of this relationship. I am writing to you because I would like to interview you.

I am contacting you because I believe that your experiences with Sweden's relationship with China could contribute to generating important insights. Perhaps you would also find it a valuable opportunity to reflect on future scenarios in Sweden's relationship with China?

The interview will take no more than an hour and will be conducted on Zoom/Teams or in person in Gothenburg/Stockholm, at a time that suits you between March 15 and April 9. You will, of course, remain anonymous, and I will follow all research ethics regulations. I will not disclose your gender or age in the results, and the reader will not receive a composite picture of each individual expert's statements. You can also decide in advance if any other information needs to be concealed to ensure your anonymity. Would you be available to participate?

My supervisor is Adrian Hyde-Price, and he can be reached at +46XX – XXX XX XX

Best regards,

Philip Nilsson

### **Appendix 4**

#### ***Interview Guide – The Frame (Translated from Swedish)***

##### **Warm-up Question:**

- a. Before we start, briefly, what is your view on Sweden's relationship with China today?

##### **Economic power:**

- a. Chinese investments in Sweden have increased in the past 15 years. Trade with China has also increased in recent years, with China being one of Sweden's largest trading partners outside the EU.
  - i. Chinese investments in Swedish companies can pose both risks and opportunities for Sweden. What risks and opportunities do you believe are associated with Chinese investments in Sweden for Sweden?

- ii. With regard to trade with China, what do you consider to be the most important aspects of economic dependence?
- b. Given the current situation, what future scenarios do you consider to be the most likely for Sweden's economic cooperation with China, and why?
  - i. What specific sectors or areas have the potential for increased cooperation between Sweden and China that could benefit both countries economically, but particularly Sweden?

**Military power (Security power):**

- a. Security issues have become an increasingly important aspect of Sweden's relationship with China. In terms of security, what are the biggest security issues that you believe affect Sweden's relationship with China, and how do they affect this relationship?
- b. What specific sectors or areas may be particularly vulnerable to Chinese influence?
- c. How do you believe a potential Swedish entry into NATO could affect Sweden's relationship with China?

**Political power (Diplomatic Relations):**

- a. Diplomatic relations are a cornerstone of cooperation between countries. What is your opinion of Sweden's current diplomatic relationship with China?
- b. What future scenarios can you envision for Sweden's diplomatic and political relationship with China?

**Ideological power (Human Rights):**

- a. Human rights are an important point for Sweden. With regard to human rights issues, what risks and opportunities does it present for Sweden to raise human rights in dialogue with China?
- b. What measures do you believe Sweden and China can take to improve their relationship despite disagreements on human rights?

**Future scenarios:**

- a. Finally, based on your expertise, what factors or events in your area do you consider important to consider when predicting future scenarios for Sweden's relationship with China?