

CHINA'S ATTACKS TO SILENCE CRITICS

A review of statements from Ambassador
Gui Congyou at the Chinese Embassy

Summary

- The Chinese State is attempting to coerce the West into implementing self-censorship through recurring attacks on individuals and institutions that defend human rights in China – attacks that are backed by financial pressure and threats of consequences.
- The strategy of applying influence is a long-term venture, where short-term setbacks are considered acceptable losses in relation to the ultimate aim of generating an effect over time.
- The Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Stockholm has been notably active in its attacks on Swedish contributors to the debate. The most sensitive issue at present for the Chinese Embassy is human rights, followed closely by events in Hong Kong, Xinjiang Province and Tibet. The person who is subject to most attacks of all is the jailed Swedish citizen Gui Minhai.



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Stockholm Free World Forum on differentiating between the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party:

Criticising the government in a single-party state is not the same as criticising the people or the country itself. This report focuses on the attempts by the Chinese Communist Party to influence the framework for the debate in Sweden through the actions of the embassy in Stockholm.

Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party has adopted an international and global strategy of stifling freedom of expression through attacks couched in words and expressions intended to scare critics into silence. First and foremost, this entails repressing those voices that speak up for human rights in areas controlled by China, and which are therefore considered a threat to the power and ambitions of the Communist Party.

The attacks are long-term in nature; the People's Republic is prepared to accept setbacks and some loss of credibility in the short term in order to invest in the future effects it is striving to achieve. China's strategic goal is to be the leading power in the world by 2050 on the strength of its financial muscle and global position. The horizon is thus thirty years in the future – not here and now, as is more typical in Western politics.

The Chinese Communist Party's sense of self-worth brooks no criticism, and its lack of patience has become particularly noticeable under the leadership of the current President, Xi Jinping. Development in this direction has accelerated since Xi Jinping convinced the National People's Congress (NPC) to change its rules to make his position a lifetime appointment, and to shatter the internationally agreed principle of "one country, two systems" in Hong Kong. Chinese attacks on freedom of speech around the world have attracted attention in a great many cases. One example is how China is attempting to steer the debates on university campuses in Australia and New Zealand by sending out a constant stream of exchange students and researchers who are loyal to the regime, combined with the application of financial influence.¹

Chinese diplomats are acting as an integrated part of the global campaign to control the narrative about China

1 Patrick, A. O., Stoakes, E., 2019, "China's influence on campus chills free speech in Australia and New Zealand", Washington Post, 9 August.

around the world. One clear example of this approach is to be found in Sweden. Since 2018, the Chinese Embassy in Sweden has been publishing statements on its website under the header "Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks" – and at a breathtaking pace.

The Ambassador and Sweden

Ambassador Gui Congyou took up his post in Sweden in autumn 2017. His background is as a specialist on Russia, and he has previously completed two postings in Moscow.² He became more visible and familiar to the Swedish public when the embassy launched an outgoing communicative style, issuing a series of rebukes to different organisations and individuals for daring to criticise the Chinese Communist Party.

In particular, the hard line approach to Gui Minhai, the Swedish citizen who was kidnapped and jailed, has attracted a great deal of attention and opposition – which has in turn been condemned by China. A prime example of this was when Gui Minhai was awarded the Tucholsky Prize by the Swedish PEN organisation. Amanda Lind, the Swedish Minister for Culture, participated in the award ceremony and China responded by threatened consequences to the cultural exchange between Sweden and China.³

This "dressing down strategy" has been comprehensive and protracted. Since the first official posting under the "Spokesperson's Remarks" in June 2018, fully 67 official statements have been published (as of mid-August 2020).

A review of these statements clearly indicates which issues China considers the most sensitive. Top of the list is human rights – especially with regard to the actions of

2 Embassy of the People's Republic of China, 2017, "Biography of Ambassador GUI Congyou"

3 Emanuelsson, E., Malm, S., 2020, "Kinesiska UD: 'Fel av svensk minister att närvara'" (Chinese Foreign Ministry: Wrong of Swedish minister to participate), Expressen, 18 November.

the Chinese regime in Xinjiang Province, Hong Kong and Tibet, and with regard to Taiwan.

Activities in and through other channels need to be taken into consideration as well in order to gain an understanding of the big picture.

Ambassador Gui Congyou has maintained the same admonishing message in interviews. For example, in an interview for the Swedish TV station SVT, the ambassador stated that the newspaper Expressen need not bother applying for visas to China unless it changed the theme of its reporting.

“Swedish journalists are welcome to visit China to monitor the country objectively, but they must renounce their prejudices and their preconceived agenda, and they must change their erroneous approach to reporting on China.”⁴

In the same interview, the ambassador attacked Karin Olsson, Head of Culture at Expressen for “having lost all sense of reason”. The style of attack in the interviews is thus the same as in the statements issued in the “Spokesperson’s Remarks” column.

The ambassador has also sent letters expressing criticism – when, for example, Ebba Busch, Leader of the Swedish Christian Democrats, used the term “Wuhan virus” in a reference to the coronavirus pandemic during a parliamentary debate. In his letter, the ambassador stated his objection to the use of the term “Wuhan virus” and expressed

his “hope” that the political leader would “express herself in a less discriminatory manner” in future.⁵

Another example was noted after journalist Ola Wong held his “summer talk” on the SR P1 radio show. What he said was then quoted on the editorial page of the Sörm-lands Nyheter newspaper, resulting in the Chinese embassy dashing off an email to several heads of department at SN – CC’ed to Ola Wong – in which Wong was referred to as an “anti-China expert”- Precisely how many such letters and emails the Chinese embassy has sent out is unknown, but it is probably a considerable number.

This study has not mapped the scope of the embassy’s other outgoing activities over and above the “Spokesperson’s Remarks”. It is, however, important to be aware that this is not the only channel used by the embassy for its communicative influencing of the public debate, even though the other channels all carry highly similar messages.

The “Spokesperson’s Remarks” in general

The embassy has posted 67 different statements since June 2018: 21 in 2018, 30 in 2019 and 16 so far this year (i.e. until the latter half of August 2020). This corresponds to approximately 2.4 statements per month.

A typical procedure starts with a reaction – which sometimes also includes an element of ridicule – followed by a stronger expression of ridicule, before concluding with a plea encouraging improved relations with China. In this regard, the post “Chinese Embassy Spokesperson: The

⁴ Holm, G., 2020, “Kinas ambassadör till angrepp mot Expressen” (Chinese Ambassador on the offensive against Expressen), Expressen, 18 January.

⁵ Rogvall, F., 2020, “Kinas protest mot Busch - efter uttalandet i riksdagen” (China’s protest against Busch – following statement in parliament), Expressen, 27 May.

ignorance and insanity of Kurdo Baksi shocked us again” from 9 September 2019 serves as an excellent illustration.

First comes the reaction, which contains an element of ridicule at the end, referring to Baksi's “insanity”:

“Recently, Kurdo Baksi made ridiculous remarks on Swedish media regarding the Gui Minhai case and the situation in Hong Kong. He distorted facts and clamored for ‘amnesty for Gui Minhai’ and ‘moving the Swedish Embassy from Beijing to Hong Kong’. We are once again shocked by his ignorance and insanity, and strongly condemn his extreme and unscrupulous anti-China behaviors.”

A little further down comes the reinforcement of the ridicule:

“What Baksi said and did not only fully exposed that he is extremely against China and supports ‘Hong Kong independence’, but also shows that he has no common sense of international law, and he does not understand and is not worthy of discussing democracy or rule of law at all. We urge Baksi to immediately stop. We urge him not to live in a world of fantasy and self-delusion, and never underestimate the ability of Swedish people to discern right and wrong.”

The statement thus concludes with an expression of hope that the Swedish media will not allow Baksi to speak in the debate, and that they will focus instead on issues that are more “constructive” to relations between China and Sweden:

“It is hoped that relevant Swedish media will not provide platforms for his inferior acting, and that the Swedish public will reject his ridiculous claims and add more positive energy to China-Sweden relations.”

The impression is that the attacks largely follow an identical pattern. The statements from the embassy closely resemble one another in their design – the only difference

being that they change the person's name and the topic in question, as well as how he or she is to be ridiculed.

The topics

Human rights is the topic that most readily triggers counter-attacks from the embassy. In fact, responses to this topic accounted for 41 of the 67 posts, with the greatest frequency in 2019.

The embassy takes several approaches. On the one hand, there are statements defending China's violation of Gui Minhai's rights, and on the other, there are multiple comments on reports of Chinese oppression in Xinjiang (eleven mentions), Tibet (three mentions) and Hong Kong (six mentions). A common trait of these three territories is that they are all sensitive issues for China, as criticism of the government undermines the regime's narrative of Chinese “stability” and “territorial integrity”.

The status of Taiwan (six mentions) is likewise an issue that recurs regularly in the review. Hong Kong only becomes an issue after the first pro-democracy demonstrations take place, while Tibet hardly attracted any attention in the Swedish media after 2018, and therefore has not featured in the embassy statements.

Another topic that triggers responses from the embassy is the call for Sweden to take action against the People's Republic of China, and the view that the country represents a threat to the security of Sweden, the EU and the West in general. Such reactions were noted on ten occasions. To this list should be added the closely related category in which China reacts on five occasions to specific issues concerning Chinese influence on Sweden.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has caused problems for the Chinese Communist Party. A comprehensive information initiative has been launched to distract from

the Chinese failures in the earliest days of the pandemic.⁶ This is also reflected in these statistics, where the virus was the subject of five statements.⁷

Other topics have merited three or fewer mentions. These include racism, trade in human organs, the new silk road – “Belt & Road” – assertions of violence by the Swedish Police and visa issues.

Individuals & Organisations

Gui Minhai

Gui Minhai, the Swedish citizen kidnapped and jailed by China, is far and away the most regular target of the attacks. The Chinese embassy has referred to the publisher by name fully 19 times. The case of Gui Minhai is also the most sensitive consular issue between Sweden and China, with China refusing to recognise Gui Minhai's Swedish citizenship. The Chinese authorities kidnapped Gui Minhai in Thailand and transported him to China where he was brought before a court and sentenced.

Gui Minhai was granted Swedish citizenship in 1996 when he became a refugee following the Tiananmen Square massacre. His actual “crime” is that as a Hong Kong-based publisher, he has published books that were troublesome to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. In 2015, five people who were involved in one way

6 See the Stockholm Free World Forum's previous reports this year: “Informationspandemi – Desinformation med flera syften” (Information pandemic – Disinformation with multiple aims) and “Coronahjälp med flera syften” (Corona assistance with several objectives).

7 It should be noted that the author of the report himself is mentioned by name in connection with China's handling of the corona situation, together with Gunnar Hökmark, Chairperson of the Stockholm Free World Forum.

or another with the “Causeway Bay Books” bookshop – of which Gui Minhai was a co-owner – disappeared, only to reappear in Chinese custody. Chinese authorities used an old traffic incident as their excuse for jailing Gui Minhai. This was followed up with a ten-year jail sentence, with the regime claiming that the publisher had revealed classified intelligence to a foreign power.⁸ The actual reason is to silence a critic of the regime.

Gui Minhai was also the subject of the first post published in 2018, when the embassy stated unequivocally that “Gui Minhai is a criminal who has committed serious crimes in China”. The embassy then added that “the Swedish side will respect the spirit of the rule of law and China's judicial sovereignty.”⁹

Typical statements from Chinese regime insist that “China has been handling this case in accordance with Chinese law and safeguarding Gui Minhai's legitimate rights according to law.”¹⁰

“Gui Minhai, the Swedish citizen kidnapped and jailed by China, is far and away the most regular target of the attacks.”

Human rights activist, media and independent organisations

The targets that have drawn the next-most fire from the Chinese Embassy received five mentions each. These include Sayragul Sauytbay, human rights activist and refugee. As a Kazakh from Xianjiang, Doctor Sauytbay has witnessed first-hand incidences of Chinese oppression and “re-education camps” for minorities in the province. Doctor Sauytbay was forced to flee from China and has been granted residence Sweden.

8 Kuo, L., 2020, “Hong Kong bookseller Gui Minhai jailed for 10 years in China”, The Guardian, 25 February.

9 Chinese Embassy, 2018, “Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks on the Case of Gui Minhai”, 8 June.

10 Chinese Embassy, 2018, “Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks on the Case of Gui Minhai”, 14 August.

In 2020, she was presented with *The International Women of Courage Award* by the American State Department.

Kurdo Baksi, author and debate contributor, has also been mentioned five times. He has been attacked for his unflinching and committed defence of Gui Minhai. The attacks on Kurdo Baksi are thus all directly linked to the case of Gui Minhai.

Angela Gui – Gui Minhai's daughter – and Gunnar Hökmark, former MEP representing the Swedish Moderate Party and currently Chairperson of the Stockholm Free World Forum, received three mentions each. Other individuals have been mentioned twice or fewer.

As regards organisations, two Swedish media companies top the list. The newspaper SvD and the TV channel SVT have been mentioned eight times each, where half of the mentions of SVT relate to the satirical show Svenska Nyheter (Swedish News), which screened a satirical "information video" in the wake of a reported incident where three Chinese tourists were ejected from a hotel in Stockholm.

Expressen, Svenska PEN and the think tank Stockholm Free World Forum have each been mentioned three times. It should be noted that in the case of the Swedish Free World Forum, three people have been mentioned by name: Chairperson Gunnar Hökmark, former project manager Viktor Lundqvist and the author of this report.

Among those receiving a single mention, it is relevant to name Amanda Lind, Minister for Culture, Anne Linde, Foreign Minister, Ulf Kirstersson, leader of the Moderate Party, Håkan Svenneling, Member of Parliament and China scholars Björn Jerdén and Jerker Hellström.

Conclusion and reflection

This compilation illustrates that Swedish criticism of human rights abuses in China is the principal trigger of public attacks from the Chinese Embassy. This applies in

particular with regard to the case of Gui Minhai. Criticism of what the Chinese regime is doing in Xinjiang Province, Hong Kong and Tibet, as well as the position of the country on Taiwan, are other issues sure to trigger a response from the embassy.

The actions of the embassy should therefore principally be viewed from a Chinese perspective, in that they serve as a form of the influence that is part of a greater whole, where many other approaches can be combined with the embassy statements.

The combination of financial dependency and the risk of being continuously attacked is giving rise to an increased risk of self-censorship and appeasement. One particularly vulnerable group is the Chinese exiles in Sweden who have relatives still living in the People's Republic, as well as individuals whose financial position is dependent on business deals and visas for China. The public attacks achieve greater impact if they are combined with other tools such as financial pressure and threats of consequences for Swedish citizens, enterprises and other Swedish stakeholders.

Attacks from China may result in debate contributors choosing to stay silent, and other commentators not daring to speak up. In this way, debate and opinion-building in Sweden are being gently eased in the direction of self-censorship. One illustrative example of how China uses different methods to apply influence was revealed in the late summer of 2020, when it became known that the recording artist Zara Larsson's songs were no longer available on Apple Music in China after Zara's statement that China "is not a nice state".¹¹

Chinese actions in Sweden are not isolated. What could be dismissed as thoughtlessness from a single ambassador is actually a part of a painstakingly prepared global strategy. Similar examples of this use of power language have been

11 Yussuf, M., 2020, "Zara Larssons musik raderad från kinesiska Apple music" (Zara Larsson's music deleted from Chinese Apple Music), Dagens Nyheter, 11 August.

recorded in other parts of the world. For example, the actor Richard Gere¹² has been turned down for several roles because China – which is an important market for films – has vetoed his selection due to his activism on behalf of Tibet, while in our own neighbourhood, Norway saw its trade severely restricted after the dissident Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that China is working from a long-term perspective in a way completely different to how political debate is typically run in Western societies. Ambassador Gui Congyou's statements have proved counter-productive to the People's Republic of China in the short term. Swedish awareness of the challenges to

democracy, human rights and – in particular – Swedish security that China represents has risen sharply since 2018. However, when we in Sweden analyse the embassy's behaviour, it is essential to look beyond the short-term impact. Otherwise, we risk underestimating the actions of the Communist Party and the threat they pose to our free and open society.

The great ideological battle of the 2000s is being fought on values such as freedom of expression and democracy. At the end of the day, it is a question of whether the world is to be governed by authoritarian regimes – such as the Chinese – or by the liberal principles of Western democracy.

12 Oppenheim, M., 2017, "Richard Gere says he's been dropped from big Hollywood movies because China doesn't like him", The Independent, 20 April.

About the study

The analysis is quantitative. Statements have been coded by year, who was mentioned, and what China was reacting to. More than one party may be identified, and China's reaction may similarly be based on multiple sources.

Certain reasons can be said to be closely related. For example, this study differentiates between, on the one hand, "Call to action against China, and China constitutes a threat to Sweden/the EU/the West" and, on the other, "Influence against Sweden through elections, media, etc."

The former encompasses a more general threat scenario and often appears jointly with the person mentioned by the embassy calling for counter-measures. The latter is more a reaction to specific information which China is counter-attacking.

When it comes to actual mentions, there may be multiple codes linked to a single name, depending on organisational affiliation; for example, when Jesper Rönndahl from the SVT programme Svenska Nyheter is attacked, the incident is coded on Rönndahl, Svenska Nyheter and SVT.

The attacks from the embassy have sometimes been more general, referring to "the media" or "prominent persons" without naming names. This "non-mentioning" has not been coded, even though it may be relatively simple to discern the intended target.

"Doubles", where the embassy issues statements in Swedish and English, have been removed

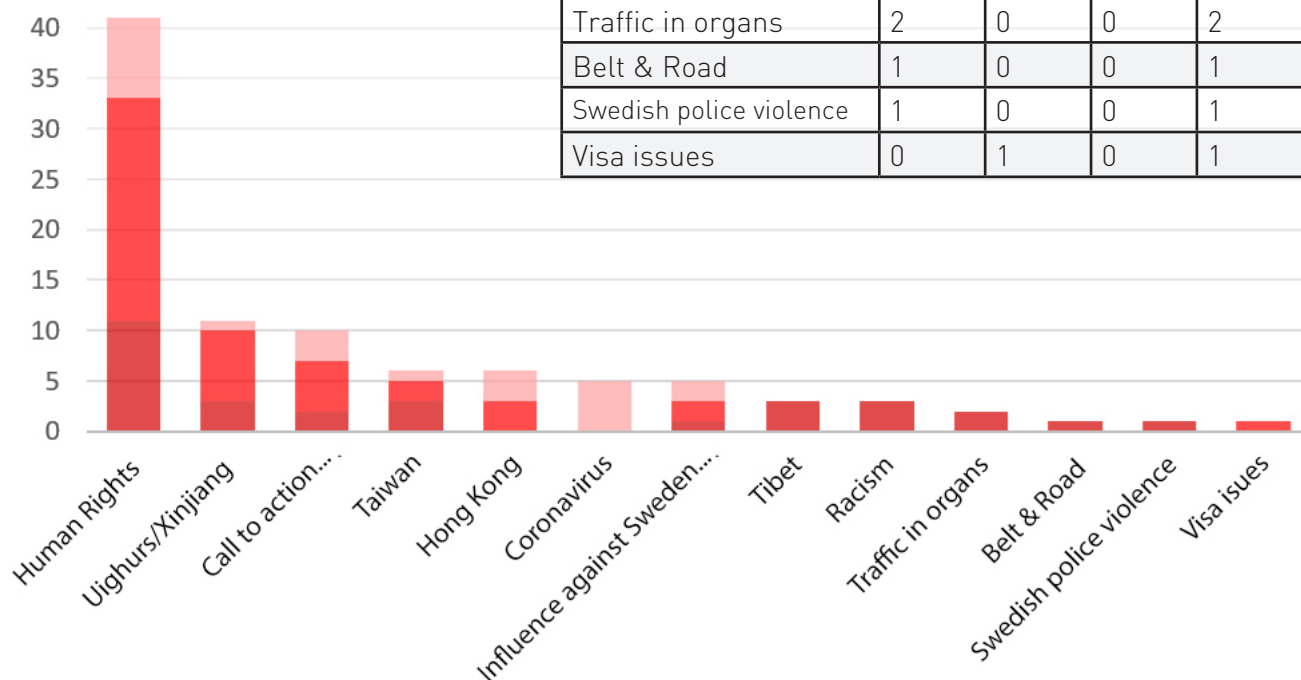
Appendix 1: Persons mentioned in the "Spokesperson's remarks" from the Chinese Embassy, 2018–2020.

| Name | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | Total |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|-------|
| Gui Minhai | 5 | 11 | 3 | 19 |
| SvD | 3 | 3 | 2 | 8 |
| SVT | 3 | 4 | 1 | 8 |
| Sayragul Sauytbay | 0 | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Kurdo Baksi | 1 | 3 | 1 | 5 |
| Svenska nyheter, SVT | 3 | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Expressen | 1 | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| Svenska Pen | 1 | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| Gunnar Hökmark | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Frivärld | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Angela Gui | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Jojje Olsson | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| DN | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Tidningsutgivarna | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| UNT | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Taipei Mission in Sweden | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| SÄPO | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Magnus Fiskesjö | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| FOI | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Dagens Industri | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Regeringen | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| Reportrar utan gränser | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 8 sidor | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Dagens Nyheter | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Dagens Samhälle | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| TT | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Falun Gong | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Norrköpings Tidningar | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Fredrik Fällman | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Göteborgs universitet | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

| Name | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | Total |
|-----------------------|------|------|------|-------|
| Bokmässan | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Författarförbundet | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Dalai Lama | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Polisen | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Jesper Rönndahl | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Thomas Hall | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Justitiekanslern | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Håkan Svenneling | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| NWT | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Lars Ströman | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| NA | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Björn Jerdén | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| NSD | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Qiao Jianjun | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Högsta Domstolen | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Aftonbladet | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Sveriges Radio | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Annie Reutersköld | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Jerker Hellström | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Amanda Lind | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Ulf Kristersson | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Moderaterna | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| KDU | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Kristoffer Applequist | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Patrik Oksanen | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Johan Lagerkvist | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Johan Nylander | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Viktor Lundqvist | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Kenneth Howery | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Ann Linde | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |

Appendix 2: Topics mentioned in the "Spokesperson's remarks" from the Chinese Embassy, 2018–2020.

| Topics | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | Totalt |
|---|------|------|------|--------|
| Human rights | 11 | 22 | 8 | 41 |
| Uighurs/Xinjiang | 3 | 7 | 1 | 11 |
| Call to action against China/China constitutes a threat to Sweden/the EU/the West | 2 | 5 | 3 | 10 |
| Taiwan | 3 | 2 | 1 | 6 |
| Hong Kong | 0 | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| Coronavirus | 0 | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| Influence against Sweden (via elections, media, etc.) | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Tibet | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Racism | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Traffic in organs | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Belt & Road | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Swedish police violence | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Visa issues | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |



■ 2018 ■ 2019 ■ 2020