

Wolf War and Peace

by Phillip Orchard - June 28, 2021

Chinese President Xi Jinping did the unexpected earlier this month during a speech delivered to a Politburo study session: He told his government to focus on cultivating a “trustworthy, lovable and respectable” image of China. That’s not the same as being trustworthy, lovable and respectable. But it stood out because Beijing, in both word and deed, has spent much of the past few years doing effectively the opposite, consequences be damned. This attitude has been embodied most visibly by the emergence of China’s new, abrasive generation of “wolf warrior” diplomats, who have been making waves with a curious approach to statecraft centered heavily on Twitter trolling, pushing conspiracy theories, and even disrupting public events that challenge the party line. Their tactics had previously been encouraged, if only implicitly, by Xi himself.

The pugilism of Chinese diplomacy reflects both the country’s burgeoning strengths and its enduring strategic and institutional frailties. Beijing has never had this much ability to reshape the international system around its needs, and yet most of the recent diplomatic big talk has been meant to impress domestic audiences. Xi may have concluded that things have gone a bit too far – that the costs of antagonizing the court of international public opinion are real. But Beijing realizes that a global strategy centered on winning hearts and minds is unlikely to bear much fruit.

Thin Skin

As in most authoritarian regimes, where the risks of acting out of step can be **deadly**, Chinese diplomats have generally had a bloodless reputation: charming in person but almost painfully taciturn and risk-averse in official capacities. To an extent, this reflected Beijing’s broader strategic worldview, as encapsulated by Deng Xiaoping’s axiom that China should “bide its time and hide its capabilities.” China was rapidly getting rich off the international system, so it had little to gain from rocking the boat until it had amassed the power to do so without getting thrown overboard.

Under Xi, China’s Foreign Ministry has hurtled in the extreme opposite direction, with senior officials and far-flung envoys alike showing their “fighting spirit” with a vigor that would make Madame Mao proud. The resulting “wolf warrior” moniker comes from a pair of recent blockbuster hits in China where a Rambo-like figure repeatedly lays waste to the motherland’s many foreign enemies.

There have been several incidents in the past few years that are hard to see as beneficial for

Chinese ambitions. For example, last October, Chinese officials gatecrashed a Taiwan National Day celebration in Fiji and ended up sparking a **fistfight** over a cake bearing the Taiwanese flag. There was the time in 2017 when a Chinese delegation **shouted down** Australia's foreign minister at an international conference on blood diamonds until a Taiwanese delegation was ejected. There have been countless cringeworthy tweets spreading conspiracy theories about COVID-19's origins and vaccines, mocking countries that have struggled to contain its spread, and launching wild counterattacks against petty slights, both real and imagined. It's all gotten more pronounced since the pandemic.

Chinese diplomats aren't wholly unique in this regard, of course. The rise of Twitter and other platforms has allowed senior officials everywhere to show the public just how thin their skin really is. But it's a particularly conspicuous departure from the norm for China. And it's elicited a lot of dismay and derision, even among more seasoned Chinese diplomats. Longtime Ambassador to the U.S. Cui Tiankai, who is set to be replaced by a more sharp-tongued figure in the coming months, has obliquely criticized the wolf warriors several times. Evidently, it may be becoming a little much even for Xi, who has encouraged the practice, perhaps unwittingly, by repeatedly calling on Chinese diplomats to stay ready to fight.

A Modest Course Correction

There are several things going on here. To start, there are at least some tactical benefits to this approach – even if they don't outweigh the risks – at a time when China is facing a mountain of unwanted attention over things like COVID-19, **Xinjiang**, **Hong Kong** and its isolation campaign against Taiwan. Flooding the zone with disinformation, conspiracy theories, false equivalents, and historical grievances is irritating for those who prefer honest debate, but it's undeniably proved successful as a communications strategy for leaders across the globe in recent years.

But the main driving factors are domestic. Nationalism is an extraordinarily powerful tool and one the ruling party has long been skilled at using to distract the public from problems at home. China today is more powerful and more insulated to international pressure than ever. It's got to feel good to **flex a bit**; some high-profile wolf warriors have become minor celebrities on Chinese social media. Under Xi, more broadly, Beijing has been shifting the national narrative from China as a poor country under permanent siege to China as an ascendant superpower on track to put the century of humiliation in the past for good. Two-level game theory – where public statements made by envoys are intended as much to please domestic audiences as to persuade their counterparts across the negotiating table – is a permanent fixture of diplomacy. Under China and the wolf warriors, this dynamic is

merely tilting more and more toward the homefront.

Finally, it reflects Chinese institutional cultures and the precarious reality of life as a Chinese diplomat. During periods of political stress and **power struggles** in Beijing, China's foreign ministry historically has not fared well, facing major purges repeatedly since the Communist Party came to power. Diplomats are particularly quick to come under suspicion for disloyalty, given their exposure to foreign influences and ability to do their jobs with relatively little supervision. Indeed, many of China's best envoys – those with the most experience in and expertise about a particular country – have found themselves in situations where their skillsets had become subjects of suspicion within their own bureaucracy. To deflect this and keep their jobs, performative nationalism has often been an essential job requirement. The surest path to either career advancement or merely survival is to stand out as an unyielding, unapologetic defender of Xi's vision of **Chinese rejuvenation**.

Does any of this matter in the big picture? Xi's call for a modest course correction suggests it does. There are some risks to the wolf warrior approach. In general, smooth diplomacy can't do a whole lot to persuade countries to do something that's not in their perceived interest. But antagonistic diplomacy can be meaningfully counterproductive. In other words, **Chinese hostility** has made it harder for, say, Australian leaders to do business with China even in areas where there's a lot of mutual interest. Conversely, anti-Chinese measures that may previously have been too politically painful for Australia to adopt now **sail through parliament**. In the past few years alone, political backlash against Chinese coercion has derailed several Chinese Belt and Road Initiative projects in Malaysia, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, scuppered the **EU-China investment treaty**, reelected an **independence-leaning president** in Taiwan and pushed India to finally join the ranks of a Western alliance system in the **Quad**.

The deeper reality is that China has a reputation problem rooted in strategic and internal political imperatives that make much of the world deeply uncomfortable. Even if its intentions were wholly benign, its rise has and will continue to be deeply disruptive and inherently problematic for many countries. Its resource needs are too immense and its internal political pressures too explosive for China to prioritize winning hearts and minds abroad over its core objectives. It cannot realistically portray itself as a **global benefactor**. It may be worth curbing wolf warrior practices that are doing more harm than good to China's strategy, and this is probably what Xi has in mind. But don't expect a fundamental reorientation of Chinese policies at home or abroad anytime soon.

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