

# Challenging China’s “Wolf Warrior” Diplomats

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The world is confronting a very different China, one with the second-largest economy and a large, modern military to support its diplomatic efforts.

Chinese diplomats, many increasingly known as “wolf warriors,” are playing hardball, pushing controversial CCP narratives and countering foreign criticism.

The U.S. must better counter false Chinese assertions rapidly, while engaging in longer-term efforts to promote American diplomatic goals.

As the world copes with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese diplomatic corps has become much more energetic, even aggressive. Far from maintaining a low profile, today’s Chinese diplomats are often both pushing controversial Chinese narratives and loudly countering foreign criticism. Whether it is denouncing the terms “Wuhan flu” and “China coronavirus” or accusing other nations of having brought COVID-19 to China or criticizing their handling of the pandemic in their country, it is clear that the Chinese Foreign Ministry is prepared to play hardball.

This new generation is described by some as “wolf warriors,” after a popular Chinese action film whose stars take on and defeat Western mercenaries and defend Chinese citizens and interests. The transition is often attributed to current Chinese leader Xi Jinping, who has certainly reshaped China’s global image into

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a far more prominent and assertive one. But this shift has been far longer in the making.

## Chinese Foreign Policy Before Xi

As China undertook much needed reforms under Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (1978–1992), recovering from the multiple decades of catastrophic economic policies and general chaos under Chairman Mao Zedong, Chinese foreign policy was carefully muted. In the early 1990s, as China coped with global outrage over the Tiananmen Square massacre, Deng famously admonished the rest of the Chinese leadership to maintain a low profile, suggesting, “Observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership.”<sup>1</sup> This was later amended to include “do something” or “work with what you have.”<sup>2</sup> Even as China’s economy took off, Deng, who remained a powerful factor albeit behind the scenes, continued to influence Chinese foreign policy, with Beijing refraining from a higher profile role.

This began to shift in the 2000s. Following Jiang Zemin’s rule (1992–2002) and a period of World Trade Organization–associated liberalizations, Chinese leader Hu Jintao (2002–2012) began to assert an increasingly prominent role for China. Hu pushed for greater Chinese foreign direct investment as part of a broader effort to expand China’s global economic presence. Indeed, it was under Hu that the “string of pearls” infrastructure investments in the Indian Ocean region began to take shape. This included investments in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Despite the “peaceful rise” mantra adopted by the CCP under Hu’s leadership, however, China’s stance was not simply one of outreach and investment. In 2010, after a Chinese fishing boat captain was arrested (having rammed two Japanese Coast Guard vessels), Beijing made clear that it expected the return of their citizen. Even after the captain was released, however, Beijing nonetheless imposed an embargo on the export of rare earth elements. This naked display of Chinese economic leverage caught everyone’s attention.

Previously, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had only used its veto three times, twice on issues involving countries that maintained diplomatic relations with the government on Taiwan as opposed to that in Beijing.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in 2007, Chinese diplomats began to cast vetoes on other issues, including in defense of the military dictatorship in Burma and the first of a series of vetoes (exercised alongside the Russians) in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. China also sought a larger role in the Conference

on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia. While it was Xi Jinping who, in 2014, called “for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia,” the groundwork for this “Asia for Asians” message had been laid by Hu nearly a decade earlier.

While Hu’s shift towards a more assertive Chinese foreign policy was generally associated with China’s growing soft power, Hu, in fact, emphasized the importance of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). In 2004, Hu issued the “new historic missions” for the PLA. Among other tasks, the PLA was charged with safeguarding China’s interests in the key domains of the world’s oceans, outer space, and the electromagnetic spectrum and information space.

The PLA took these new responsibilities seriously. At sea, not only was the PLA Navy expanding and modernizing, but it also began to challenge U.S. naval vessels operating in what China claimed to be its territorial waters. The harassment of the USNS *Impeccable* and USS *John S. McCain III* in 2009 marked the start of a much more assertive Chinese stance in its littoral waters. In space, China tested an anti-satellite weapon in 2007—the most debris-generating event in the Space Age. In the cyber realm, Chinese hackers moved ever more brazenly and extensively.

Chinese military efforts also took on a more multinational aspect, as the PLA exercised with the Russian military for the first time in decades. Under the rubric of “Peace Mission” exercises held by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Chinese and Russian military forces engaged in extensive land, sea, and air maneuvers.

What was missing from the Chinese effort was a strong foreign ministry. The PRC is governed through the equivalent of a dual structure. Policy setting is done by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Its top leadership, represented by the 24 members of the Political Bureau (Politburo) of the CCP Central Committee—and especially the subset comprising the Politburo Standing Committee—is the actual power in the PRC.<sup>4</sup> The Politburo and its Standing Committee set priorities, determine policy lines, and generally chart the course of the PRC.

Policy implementation, on the other hand, is by the Chinese state, as reflected in the 25 ministries comprising the State Council. While the Chinese state is ostensibly led by the premier, vice premiers, and other members of the State Council, in reality, these elements are creating plans to support the priorities set by the Politburo. Divining Chinese policy is further complicated by the reality that the members of the State Council are not necessarily the highest-ranking members of the CCP. While the

head of the CCP (the General Secretary) and the highest authority in the PRC state (the president) are the same person, Politburo members may be relatively low-ranking ministers. As important, senior government officials may nonetheless be relatively lesser ranked members of the CCP. What matters most is one's place in the *Party*, not the *state*.

This was the situation for the Chinese Foreign Ministry for much of the 2000s. Qian Qichen, China's foreign minister, state councilor, and vice premier during much of Jiang Zemin's rule, was also a member of the CCP Politburo. This meant that the Chinese Foreign Ministry had a place among China's policymakers. But when Qian was replaced by Tang Jiaxuan as Foreign Minister in 1998, Tang was not a member of the Politburo, nor was he subsequently elevated to its membership, even after he rose to the State Council in 2003—nor were his various successors as foreign minister and state councilor for foreign affairs.

Thus, for most of the first two decades of the 21st century, China's Foreign Ministry was not represented on the highest levels of the CCP (i.e., the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee). This meant that the Chinese Foreign Ministry had a minimal role in setting China's foreign policy. While Foreign Ministry officials could be called upon to brief and otherwise advise, they were not necessarily part of the final establishment of policy.

This situation, which has no real parallel in American or Soviet history, may explain a number of awkward situations, including the 2010 Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum meeting. After U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the U.S. was “back” in Southeast Asia and prepared to mediate territorial disputes such as those in the South China Sea, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi disappeared for an hour, returning to give a strongly worded response.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, when the Chinese tested their anti-satellite system in 2007, generating an enormous amount of debris, Chinese diplomats were often summoned to local foreign ministries, only to reveal that they had been as much in the dark as their foreign counterparts. It took the Chinese Foreign Ministry 12 days to issue even the most tepid of statements, leading to speculation in some quarters that the PLA had gone “rogue.”<sup>6</sup>

China's foreign ministers were excluded from the central decision-making body of the Politburo until 2017, when Yang Jiechi, now the state councilor for foreign affairs (more senior than the foreign minister), was elevated to the 19th Politburo of the CCP. This not only integrated Foreign Ministry views into the setting of foreign policy, but also elevated its personnel in terms of China's internal political structure. It is in this context that China's diplomats and foreign ministry spokespeople are now undertaking their duties.

## Rise of the “Wolf Warrior” Diplomats

With this elevation, the Chinese diplomatic corps has become much more energetic, even aggressive. The most public incident was the tweet by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian. Responding to President Trump’s characterization of the COVID-19 virus as “Chinese coronavirus” and “Wuhan flu,” Zhao tweeted:

CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!<sup>7</sup>

Zhao’s tweet<sup>8</sup> and its reference to a conspiracy theory suggesting that the disease might have been deliberately spread by the U.S. military aroused a major global reaction, as media worldwide discussed it. Comparisons were made to the “wolf warrior” series of Chinese action movies, which feature a Chinese special operations force soldier who defeats American mercenaries in battles across Africa.<sup>9</sup>

The tweet, however, is neither the first controversial one from Zhao nor the first example of hardball Chinese foreign policy. In 2018, for example, Chinese agents seized Gui Minhai, a Chinese-Swede traveling with Swedish diplomats while seeking medical treatment. He was convicted earlier this year of passing secrets to foreigners. Also in 2018, Canadian former diplomat Michael Kovrig was seized, apparently in response to the Canadian detention of Meng Wanzhou, Huawei’s chief financial officer. China’s embassy also denounced Italian parliamentarians as “irresponsible” when they invited Hong Kong activist Joshua Wang to testify about China’s crackdown in November 2019.<sup>10</sup>

It is the COVID-19 crisis, however, that has bared the teeth of Chinese diplomats. Beijing’s representatives in France, Sweden, and Venezuela have all issued papers and statements that smack of imperial high-handedness. An unnamed Chinese diplomat posted a statement that included the claim that French nurses had abandoned their patients in nursing homes, leaving them to starve.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese embassy in Caracas tweeted that Venezuelan officials should “put on a face mask and shut up,” after they had referred to the “Wuhan virus.”<sup>12</sup> The Chinese ambassador was summoned to the Swedish foreign ministry after comparing Sweden to a lightweight boxer taking on a heavyweight.<sup>13</sup>

Part of this more assertive, even aggressive, foreign policy demeanor is almost certainly rooted in the bureaucratic elevation of the Foreign Ministry. Since they are now part of the policymaking environment, they have

far more influence on actual foreign policy of the PRC. Able to influence Chinese foreign policy directly for the first time in two decades, rather than defer to other parts of the system, current Chinese diplomats may well want to differentiate themselves from their predecessors.

In addition, though, this evolution occurs alongside a generational shift in the entire Chinese leadership at the levels below the Politburo and its Standing Committee. Zhao Lijian, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, was born in 1973. Chinese ambassador to France Lu Shaye was born in 1965. The generational cohort of Zhao and Lu was born during or after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and, more importantly, came of age in Deng Xiaoping’s China. Their subordinates, in turn, are in their 30s and 40s. The world these people have experienced is very different from that of their parents’ generation or of Xi Jinping (who was born in 1953).

For all of their lives, unlike for Xi or his premier Li Keqiang, China’s economy has been growing, and China’s political star has been rising. There have been no major, extended disruptions like the Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap Forward. Instead, China has steadily advanced and modernized, and alongside its gleaming cities and uninterrupted economic growth has been a constant growth of its international standing and power. A major international power will inevitably want to chart its own course.

In such a view, it is long past time for China to cease “biding one’s time.” Indeed, any power with such growing capabilities would reasonably want to be heard and seen on the international stage, shaping and molding the world more to its own liking. A robust assertion of Chinese rights and positions is therefore consistent with Xi Jinping’s “China dream” of the “great revival of the Chinese people,” and complements China’s constellations of satellites, massive Internet presence, and modernized military.

With the elevation of Yang Jiechi to the Chinese Politburo, moreover, China’s diplomats are implementing policies for which they were able to determine objectives—and even tone. China’s diplomats may eventually modulate their message, but for the foreseeable future, they are unlikely to hide their lights under a bushel again.

## Implications for the Future

For the United States, and indeed the world, this is a very different China that they will confront. The PRC, even without a diplomat in the Politburo, clearly understood the power available to it through such instruments as state-sponsored and state-directed loans, state-directed economic espionage, and the full weight of China’s cyber and network-warfare capabilities.

Chinese officials have long taken their places in the senior echelons of international organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization and the U.N.'s International Telecommunications Union. In these posts, they have operated as Chinese officials, supporting Chinese state goals, rather than as impartial international bureaucrats supporting the functions of the organization.

With a diplomat in the ruling Politburo, however, it is clear that China's diplomats have found firmer bureaucratic footing, and with it a louder voice. It may not always be so bold and brash, but the days of a retiring, diffident Chinese diplomatic corps have probably passed. As important, with the resources of both the second-largest economy and a modern, large military to support it, China's diplomacy will undoubtedly be more willing to promote China's interests, emphasizing China's concerns, and focusing on China's benefit.

As important, judging from these initial forays and responses, China's diplomats are likely to be not only more aggressive but more agile, especially in exploiting all the tools of modern communications. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao, for example, has exploited the global reach of Twitter to push the conspiracy theory of American responsibility for COVID-19.

## Recommendations for the United States

To successfully deal with this new generation of Chinese diplomats and diplomacy, it is essential that the U.S. government be better prepared to counter Chinese assertions rapidly, while also engaging in longer-term efforts to both better promote American diplomacy and understand China's weaknesses. To this end, the U.S. should:

- **Expand cooperation with foreign legislatures.** One important element of America's alliances and friends is that many of them are robust democracies. Whether France, Germany, the U.K., Japan, or India, there are important roles for parliamentarians and Members of Congress. The U.S. Congress should engage its fellow parliamentarians, whether discussing current policies (e.g., how to bring our respective economies back online) or future legislative efforts (such as the creation of counterparts to the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States). This has begun with the newly formed Inter-parliamentary Alliance on China, comprised of lawmakers from now more than 100 legislators from a dozen countries. This is an area in which China simply cannot compete. The Chinese National People's Congress does not play anywhere near as important a role as democratic legislatures. The

American Congress is a co-equal branch of government with the President; it should therefore shoulder part of the responsibility of improving ties and coordination with key allies and partners.

- **Better coordinate public diplomacy and strategic communications.** One advantage that Chinese diplomats have is a developed strategy for public opinion warfare, which is integral to their broader view of political warfare. The United States, partly due to historical factors, has a far more fragmented approach. There are a variety of public affairs offices for the various cabinet-level departments, as well as the Global Engagement Center (responsible for countering questionable news) and the Office of Strategic Communications and Outreach (responsible for supporting U.S. arms control efforts) at the State Department. Separately, there is the U.S. Agency for Global Media, which replaced the old Broadcasting Board of Governors and oversees the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and other U.S. government-sponsored media organizations. Such a diverse group of entities, unless tightly coordinated, will not produce a symphony but a cacophony of messages, statements, and memes. While America does not speak with one voice, the U.S. government should.
- **Re-examine the roles and missions of the U.S. Agency for Global Media.** Part of the problem is that, with the end of the Cold War, the U.S. government's media operations have lost their focus. In a world with CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and a host of other outlets, what is the function of the various government-supported broadcasters? The Agency for Global Media should not be a propaganda outlet for any individual Administration—but neither is it likely to successfully compete against existing news organizations. Arguably, various entities such as Voice of America and Radio Marti, for example, should be investigating and probing the actions of America's foreign adversaries and rivals while also providing objective information about the United States. Indeed, the VOA's charter says specifically that it will “serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news. VOA news will be accurate, objective, and comprehensive.”<sup>14</sup>

As important, the various U.S. government media operations should not only be employing traditional means such as shortwave radio, but also social media and the Internet. One function might be to expand

Internet connectivity to places such as the PRC, which actively blocks free and unfettered access to the Internet's resources. Although China cracks down on virtual private networks, other methods such as "freedom sticks" and proxy networks have been developed (and countered) to allow Chinese netizens better access to the broader global Internet.<sup>15</sup>

By better coordinating overall US public messaging and strategic diplomacy, the available resources (which includes some \$750 million a year for the U.S. Agency for Global Media) can hopefully be better employed to greater effect.

## Conclusion

As the world emerges from the lockdowns and disruptions caused by COVID-19, it will be a new world in many ways. The economic and political impacts have yet to be fully assessed. What is clear is that the Chinese leadership intends to play a major role in shaping that post-COVID-19 world—and its diplomatic corps will aggressively assert China's interests to that end. The United States should not expect to face a relatively low-profile Chinese effort that plies nations with economic aid in the background, but will instead likely confront a feisty cadre of diplomats equipped with a robust set of tools ranging from economic aid to social media accounts that will challenge them at every turn.

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## Endnotes

1. 冷静观察、稳住阵脚、沉着应付、韬光养晦、决不当头、(lengjing guan cha, wenzhu zhenjiao, chenzhuo yingfu, taoguang yanghui, juebu dangtou.).
2. 有所作为 (yousuo zuowe).
3. These occurred first with Guatemala in 1997, then with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (now North Macedonia) in 1999.
4. In the post-Mao period, the CCP Politburo Standing Committee has varied from five to nine members. It currently has seven members.
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8. The choice of fora here is ironic, since the average Chinese person cannot have a Twitter account.
9. Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "China's 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy Comes to Twitter," *Axios*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/china-diplomacy-twitter-7a6b8287-f7f0-4dc1-be8a-0eb146b111bc.html> (accessed June 15, 2020). The films have been the highest grossing non-English-language films in the world.
10. "Italian MPs 'Irresponsible' with Wong: China Embassy," ANSA, November 29, 2019, [https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2019/11/29/italian-mps-irresponsible-with-wong-china-embassy\\_2d3dfd28-b973-4ce0-9981-c6730e8eaa88.html](https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2019/11/29/italian-mps-irresponsible-with-wong-china-embassy_2d3dfd28-b973-4ce0-9981-c6730e8eaa88.html) (accessed June 15, 2020).
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12. Allen-Ebrahimian, "China's 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy Comes to Twitter."
13. Zhuang Pinghui, "China's Ambassador to Sweden Summoned After He Hit Out at 'Smears' in Latest Outburst Against Beijing Critics," *South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3046689/chinas-ambassador-sweden-hits-out-smears-latest-outburst> (accessed June 15, 2020).
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