

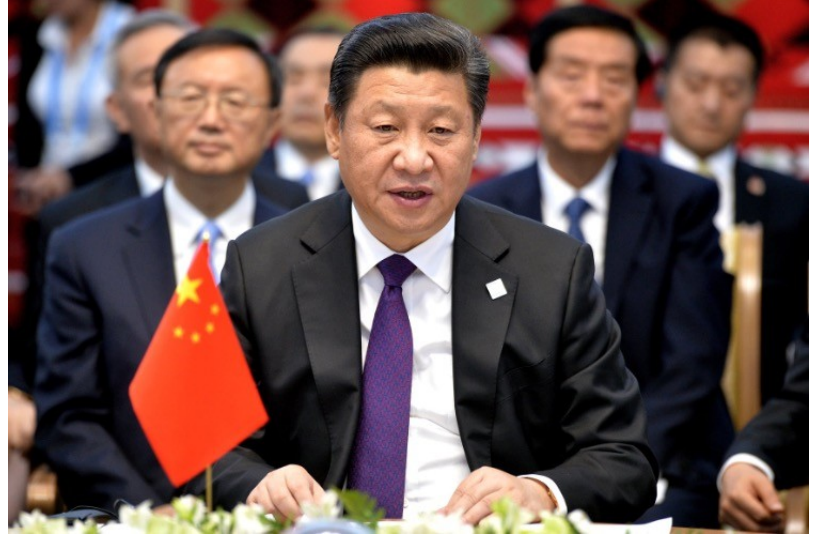


Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on October 1, 2022

A Glimpse Into China's "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" Under Xi Jinping

SINGAPORE — On Thursday, China indicated that it would not relent in its bellicose approach to foreign policy, amid Western criticism that China's so-called wolf-warrior diplomatic stance has been countereffective.

The communist country's ties with the West have worsened in recent years, due to matters ranging from Covid-19 to its treatment of [regime critics](#) as well as minority groups such as Uyghurs. Meanwhile, Chinese diplomats have often been combative on the public stage, including on social-media platforms such as Twitter.



kremlin.ru
Xi Jinping

"We Chinese will not capitulate. We will not sit and do nothing while our country's interests are being harmed," Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu asserted in response to a reporter at a news conference about Chinese diplomacy in the decade since [Xi Jinping rose to power](#).

"Going forward, Chinese diplomats will continue to overcome all obstacles, and always be the devoted guardians of the interests of our country and our people," said Ma, who is regarded to be among the candidates to replace Wang Yi as foreign minister in an impending leadership reorganization.

Ma's remarks bring to mind an episode commemorating the first ministerial level meeting between China and the United States under the Biden administration held in Alaska in March 2021.

During that meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken outlined a list of Chinese actions of "deep concern" to the United States, which he claimed were endangering the "rules-based international order."

In response to Blinken's remarks, Central Foreign Affairs Commission Director Yang Jiechi retorted by contrasting Chinese achievements with his own evaluation of American failings in human rights, democracy, and foreign relations.

Yang added a line that would linger on for weeks in Chinese media and cyberspace: "Chinese people won't swallow this crap" (*Zhongguoren buchizheyitao*). Consequently, *The Washington Post* and other U.S. media portrayed Yang's outburst as the essence of "wolf warrior diplomacy."

The term "wolf warrior" originates from a patriotic and popular 2015 [Chinese action film](#), along with its 2017 sequel. These two films portray Chinese elite soldiers defending the country from enemies and are blatant in their message. For instance, the tagline to the first movie reads, "Even though a thousand miles away, anyone who affronts China will pay."

Hence when Chinese diplomats, such as Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, responded to Xi's call for Chinese diplomats to have more "fighting spirit" by acting more forcefully on domestically



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banned platforms such as Twitter, people compared them to the heroes of the films.

Notably, Zhao amassed a huge online following. Together with Hua Chunying, director general for the Information Department, Zhao enjoys more than a million followers on Twitter. Other active Twitter users that comment on foreign affairs regularly, and act as trolls occasionally, include Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the Beijing-backed newspaper *Global Times*.

Over time, it dawned on China's foreign ministry that social-media platforms could be used as tools for Beijing to directly engage with the West, following Zhao's social-media ascent. As a result, Twitter and social-media in general have become crucial means for wolf warrior diplomacy.

Peter Martin, author of *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, opined that most Chinese diplomats who use social-media platforms have the goal of capturing the attention of either China's foreign ministry or top leadership echelons in Beijing.

Martin observed that diplomats such as Zhao Lijian who have employed wolf warrior diplomatic tactics have typically been promoted quickly by Xi. It seems very likely that China's top leader would continue rewarding people who conduct diplomacy in a more pushy manner, added Martin.

True enough, Xi's own speeches, pronouncements, and policies in the past couple of years reflect his approach toward a more domineering foreign-policy strategy that aligns with his stance on domestic policy and party management.

For example, "Document No. 9," a leaked directive from 2013, divulged Xi's priorities on tackling hostile forces penetrating the Chinese ideological sphere.

Also, in 2009, during a visit to Mexico as vice president, Xi made the unusually unrestrained comment that China's critics were merely "foreigners who've eaten their fill and have nothing better to do."

To boot, Xi also urged diplomats and military leaders to uphold the "image sovereignty" of China as well as to "tell China's story well" in a more proactive way.

Indeed, the number of Chinese diplomatic social-media accounts has skyrocketed in recent years. Based on a May 2021 report by the Associated Press and Oxford Internet Institute, 75 percent of the 270 active Chinese diplomatic profiles on Twitter joined since 2019.

Some accounts are a result of new diplomatic assignments. For example, China's ambassador to the U.K., Zheng Zeguang, began to use Twitter when he was posted overseas in his first high-level job.

Other ambassadors with prior ambassadorial experience have also launched accounts after assuming their present appointments.

For instance, Chen Weiqing, who was appointed ambassador to Saudi Arabia in May 2019, started his Twitter profile in July 2019 but had no social-media presence in his previous posting in Iraq.

By the same token, China's ambassador to Iran, Chang Hua, was appointed in June 2019 and opened his Twitter account in October 2019. Nonetheless, Chang had no social-media presence in his prior postings to the UAE and Yemen.

Beijing sympathizers have justified the wolf-warrior diplomatic approach used by the Chinese, claiming that the Chinese have been historically looked down upon by the Western world and need to re-assert Chinese interests on the global arena.

These sympathizers refer to the period of "national humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers such as



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Japan and Great Britain. Thus many Chinese diplomats deem wolf warrior diplomacy as more reactive and defensive than aggressive in nature. This “national humiliation” narrative also positioned China as the wronged party while putting the blame on foreign actors’ transgressions to persuade others to capitulate to Chinese preferences.

In light of a stronger and more assertive China, these diplomats aim to use wolf warrior diplomatic tactics to assert Chinese national interests with greater confidence.

Under the aegis of China’s previous leader Deng Xiaoping, diplomacy was more subdued and low-key. Leaders such as Deng hoped to allay global concerns that China’s rise would endanger the international order. Such reassurances assumed many forms, such as advocating China’s soft power in the form of Chinese language institutes set up in various parts of the world.

That being said, the use of caustic language by the communist regime in Beijing in foreign diplomacy is not entirely unprecedented. Even before Xi’s ascent to power, Chinese ambassadors, foreign ministry personnel, and commentators have resorted to strong language and actions to defend the country’s policies.

In 1999, after the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, an op-ed in the *People’s Daily*, a pro-Beijing news platform, compared the United States to Nazi Germany.

In 1967, Chinese diplomats were entangled in an undiplomatic fray with police outside the embassy in London, even brandishing blunt weapons and an ax, amid frosty Sino-British ties.

Wolf-warrior communication acts are typically triggered by foreign criticism of Chinese positions, policy, or behaviors. Also, any real or perceived interference in China’s internal affairs, especially issues regarding core interests such as the country’s territory, sovereignty, and governance, would be responded to acerbically. Therefore, wolf warriors comment on a spectrum of issues, including controversial matters pertaining to Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South China Sea.

Observers have noted that Chinese diplomats have shown a willingness to employ sarcasm and irony as part of their wolf-warrior approach in the public sphere to directly engage with foreign state actors.

A good illustration of such a tactic would be when the U.S. State Department condemned Chinese actions regarding to Hong Kong, Hua Chunying riposted with a tweet that said simply, “I can’t breathe,” the final words of George Floyd, a black man who died in police custody Minneapolis.

Hua’s tweet epitomizes the *modus operandi* of “wolf warrior” communications: Foreign criticism, especially from the U.S. government, necessitates a direct and speedy retort. By diverting attention from China’s flaws, Hua instead highlighted what she perceived to be contradictions and hypocrisy in the United States’ own track record on a relevant topic.

Such a rhetorical tactic that was introduced by Soviet-era propagandists addressed the highly entrenched resentment of “Western hypocrisy” that inundated and still continues to fuel Chinese nationalism to this very day.

In July 2021, China Global Television Network (CGTN) responded on Twitter to *The New York Times* criticism of “wolf warrior diplomacy” with a rhetorical “Why Not?” The reason given was the perception that China faces “many wolves out there.”

Since his rise, Xi felt that the Chinese Communist Party should remain unapologetic for the way the country works. He thus called for a more domineering style of handling China’s foreign relations. As a result, should China not be accorded the respect that Chinese officials think it should receive,



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repercussions would ensue.

Studies from Yaoyao Dai and Luwei Rose Luqiu published by *The Monkey Cage* disclosed that [an average of 10 percent of Foreign Ministry speeches](#) were “combative and hostile” before 2012. That figure rose to more than a quarter in 2019 and 2020.

Many pro-Beijing audiences regard the tone employed by Xi’s wolf-warrior approach as frank, bold, and strong. Western audiences, on the other hand, have perceived such approaches as combative and have contrasted Chinese bellicosity with the Taiwanese [softer diplomatic style](#) of “cat diplomacy”.

A recent global survey released in September 2022 by the Washington-based Pew Research Center revealed that public opinion toward China in the United States and other advanced economies had become “precipitously more negative” under Xi. Critics and political observers commented that Xi’s aggressive approach could be a veneer to sweep existing problems in China under the rug.

Wu Qiang, a political analyst, opined, “This kind of toughness hides something ... flaws and contradictions, and it shows a lack of patience and effective tactics. All that’s left are threats.” Yet, with Xi slated to obtain a third leadership term at October’s once-in-five-years congress of the ruling Communist Party, China’s army of wolf warriors and Xi sycophants will likely continue to howl in the international arena — at least for the near future.



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