



INTERPRETING CHINA'S "WOLF-WARRIOR DIPLOMACY"

BY ZHIQUN ZHU

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Recently the Chinese foreign ministry has taken an increasingly strident tone against the United States, Australia, and other countries. Dubbed "[wolf-warrior diplomacy](#)," this new approach seems popular inside China and reinforces a presumed transition of Chinese diplomacy from conservative, passive, and low-key to assertive, proactive, and high-profile.

Wolf Warrior and *Wolf Warrior II* are Chinese action blockbusters that highlight agents of Chinese special operation forces. They have boosted national pride and patriotism among Chinese viewers.

"Wolf-warrior diplomacy," named after these movies, describes Chinese diplomats' offensive to defend China's national interests, often in confrontational way. China's foreign ministry spokespersons Hua Chunying and Zhao Lijian have taken to Twitter to hit back against external criticisms of China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak and the poor quality of exported Chinese medical equipment. Zhao said [in a tweet](#) on March 20 that "if someone claims that China's exports are toxic, then stop wearing China-made masks and protective gowns." He suggested in [another tweet](#) on March 12 that "It might be (the) US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan."

Why is China resorting to "wolf-warrior diplomacy?" Has this aggressive style become the new norm?

Soaring Nationalism

First, this change did not occur suddenly. Since 2010, when China's GDP overtook Japan's as the world's second largest, the Chinese have become more confident and China's foreign policy has become

more assertive, gradually departing from Deng Xiaoping's [taoguang yanghui](#) dictum. As the Communist Party continues to promote "[four confidences](#)"—in our chosen path, in our political system, in our guiding theories, and in our culture—nationalism has been on the rise. "Wolf-warrior diplomacy" is an extension of soaring nationalism at home.

In recent years, President Xi Jinping has advocated "[a fighting spirit](#)" on several occasions, whether speaking to soldiers or party officials. This has apparently raised the morale of Chinese officials and diplomats, and encouraged a more assertive style.

"Wolf-warrior diplomacy" is evidenced not only in combative words but aggressive actions. For example, in early April, a Chinese coastguard ship [allegedly sank](#) a Vietnamese fishing trawler near the Paracel Islands. When Vietnam protested, the Chinese foreign ministry responded by saying Vietnam's claims to the area are "illegal." Then on April 19, the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources and Ministry of Civil Affairs jointly announced the [naming of 80 islands](#), reefs, seamounts, shoals, and ridges in the South China Sea, triggering angry protests from other claimants. The last time China named islands and other geographical features in the South China Sea was in 1983.

Telling the China Story

Second, as China becomes more powerful, some other countries increasingly view its development as a threat to their national interests. These countries are generally unprepared or unwilling to accept China's rise. Many Chinese believe the Western media portrayal of China is highly biased, often with ideological and racist tinges. Wolf-warrior diplomacy is part of the Chinese government's endeavor to "tell the China story." The latest diplomatic offensive is also part of the official effort to project China as a great power leading the global fight against the Covid-19.

China's image suffered during the crisis due to its bungled handling of the outbreak at the early stage. Many blame China for initially covering up the human-to-human transmission of the virus and not sharing complete information with the international community.

From China's perspective, wolf-warrior diplomacy is a direct response to "unfair" approaches by other countries, especially the US, toward China and the

Chinese people. For example, earlier this year, the United States and China were engaged in a race to expel journalists, starting after the publication of an [op-ed](#) entitled “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia” in *The Wall Street Journal*. When the WSJ refused to apologize, China [expelled](#) three of its journalists. Shortly afterwards, the US State Department [declared](#) five Chinese media outlets “foreign missions,” requiring them to register personnel and property with the US government and cut the number of Chinese nationals working there. In retaliation, China [expelled more](#) American journalists.

Zhao’s claim that the coronavirus might have been brought to Wuhan by the US military was a response to US politicians’ calling it “Chinese virus.” Hawks in the Trump administration, notably Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, continue to use the term “[Wuhan virus](#),” in defiance of the World Health Organization [guidelines](#), to shift all responsibility to China.

Fizzling Out?

Third, just as Chinese society has become more diverse, Chinese diplomats are not monolithic. There is no consensus within the Chinese foreign policy establishment on whether confrontational diplomacy is desirable, and not all Chinese diplomats are wolf-warriors.

Traditionally minded Chinese diplomats, including the long-serving ambassador to Washington Cui Tiankai, have sought to tamp down the combative impulse and [dismissed](#) Zhao’s theory about the US military as “crazy.” Another veteran diplomat, Fu Ying, said Chinese diplomats should uphold “the spirit of humility and tolerance, and adhere to communication, learning, and openness.”

It is too early to tell whether “wolf-warrior diplomacy” represents the culmination of Chinese diplomacy’s transition. As China faces growing external criticisms and demands for reparations over the coronavirus, it is not inconceivable that Chinese leaders may rein in confrontational diplomacy to create an environment conducive to domestic reconstruction.

In fact, wolf-warrior diplomacy is already hurting China’s foreign policy, since it has generated pushback, such as Australia’s calls for an independent probe into the coronavirus’ origins. China’s soft power is weak globally; a belligerent approach will further damage China’s global image. According [Pew polls](#) released on April 21, 66% of Americans say they

have an unfavorable view of China, its most negative rating since Pew began asking the question in 2005. As the American public opinion of China and Xi turns more negative, so does Chinese public opinion on America. Professor Wang Jisi of Peking University noted in a recent speech that attitudes in the Chinese government, think tanks, media, and public opinion toward the US have greatly changed during the Covid-19 period. Yet, one sees no end in the information war and diplomatic battle. America’s naming and shaming of China, and China’s tit-for-tat response have made much-needed cooperation in combating the coronavirus very difficult.

Balancing National Interests and Soft Power

It is truly unfortunate that China and the United States are engaged in a diplomatic tussle and blame each other when they should work together. It’s imperative that they play down their differences and focus on containing the coronavirus.

As a nation proud of its glorious ancient civilization, China should remain humble, benevolent, and magnanimous. It should also admit its botched handling of the coronavirus at the outset and hold relevant officials accountable. The Chinese government should improve the mechanism that encourages, not impedes, local officials to report such public health alerts.

Due to political, ideological, and cultural differences, Western suspicions about the Chinese government and anxiety about China’s rise will not disappear anytime soon, and the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated such distrust and apprehension. A more powerful China should be more confident and receptive to constructive criticism. Striking a balance between firmly defending national interests and enhancing soft power is a great challenge in Chinese diplomacy today.

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