



CHINA NEEDS DIPLOMATS, NOT WOLVES

BY CRAIG KAFURA

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China's "[Wolf Warrior](#)" diplomacy is making headlines around the world. But while it might be hitting the right notes back home, it may not play so well with overseas audiences. Polls in the US, Canada, and Australia all point to growing public concerns with China. That should be an opportunity for Chinese diplomats to jump in and ... well, be diplomatic. But rather than seeking to ameliorate the tensions between China and its potential partners, the Wolf Warriors seem set on making things worse with [wild conspiracy theories](#) and [Twitter trolling](#).

United States

For many years, Americans have [favored](#) pursuing a policy of cooperation and engagement with China, despite their [mistrust](#) of China's handling of international affairs. But attitudes are changing. The [latest poll](#) from the Pew Research Center, conducted March 3-29, finds that Americans are more negative toward China than at any time in Pew's prior polling on the issue, dating back to 2005. Two-thirds (66%) say they have an unfavorable opinion of the PRC, up from just 47% in 2018; only one in four (26%) has a favorable opinion of China.

While a Republican administration has been [leading the charge](#) against China, the growing negativity towards to PRC is a [bipartisan phenomenon](#), and that's also true of public opinion. Seven in 10

Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (72%), along with six in 10 Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (62%), now have an unfavorable view of China. For both partisan groups, that represents a double-digit increase from 2018, with negative views increasing 21 for Republicans and 15 percentage points for Democrats.

These growing negative perceptions are matched by growing concerns about Beijing's power and influence. More than six in 10 Americans see China's power and influence as a major threat, up from 48% in 2018. Though this puts concerns about the PRC behind other key threats, such as the spread of infectious diseases (79%), terrorism (73%), and the spread of nuclear weapons (73%), more Americans describe China's power and influence as a critical threat than say the same for Russia's power and influence (56%). And China's power and influence is one of the few concerns to have risen sharply over the past two years.

Canada

Canadian favorability toward China has plummeted in recent years. According to the latest survey by the [Angus Reid Institute](#), only 14 percent of Canadians hold a favorable view of China, down from 48 percent in 2017. And few (9%) say that Beijing has been transparent and honest about the COVID-19 situation in China.

Canadians' trade preferences have been affected as well. Few Canadians today name China as a country with which Canada should seek closer trade ties, (11%, down from 40% in 2015). One reason: a public more inclined to prioritize human rights over trade opportunities. Canadians increasingly say that they should prioritize human rights and the rule of law over trade and investment opportunities for Canada (76%, up from 62% in early 2019)—and most Canadians say China cannot be trusted on human rights or the rule of law (88%).

Beijing's Wolves are not wholly responsible for this situation. Three major factors have pushed Sino-Canadian relations to this point. The PRC's detention of Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, in

retaliation for the 2018 arrest of Meng Wanzhou, put Sino-Canadian relations on a [steep downward trajectory](#). Given the Canadian public's prioritization of human rights and the rule of law, the protests in Hong Kong and their repression by state authorities likely kept relations on a negative course. And now the coronavirus pandemic has added further fuel to the fire.

Australia

Australia is another example of Wolf Warrior diplomats setting more fires than they put out. There are certainly diplomatic challenges to confront in Canberra. According to [Lowy institute polling](#) conducted April 14-27, nearly seven in 10 Australians say China has handled the Covid-19 outbreak fairly or very badly, and a similar proportion (68%) say the way China has handled the Covid-19 outbreak has made them less favorable towards China's system of government. And the [2020 Lowy Poll](#) finds that few Australians (23%) trust China to act responsibly in the world.

Still, there are also diplomatic opportunities for Beijing, as Australians don't think the combined health and economic crisis facing China will weaken it. Only a quarter of Australians (27%) predict China will come out of the crisis less powerful than before. Australians are more likely to see China emerging more powerful (37%) or just as powerful (36%) as before. By comparison, few see the US as emerging stronger; a majority (53%) predict it will come out of the crisis less powerful than before.

This could be an opportunity for adroit diplomacy to mollify concerns over China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak while reinforcing perceptions of future Chinese strength. Instead, China's ambassador in Australia [warned](#) that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's push for an independent inquiry into the coronavirus outbreak was "dangerous" and that the "Chinese public is frustrated, dismayed, and disappointed with what Australia is doing now." Soon after, China [banned](#) a substantial portion of Australia's beef exports and imposed [tariffs](#) of more than 80% on Australian barley, [putting in danger](#) one

of Australia's top export markets for agricultural goods.

Conclusion

Given the array of challenges facing China at this moment, the timing couldn't be worse for Beijing's diplomats to abandon diplomacy. In addition to [demands for an inquiry](#) into the initial outbreak of Covid-19, Chinese officials are facing [multinational criticism](#) over the recent imposition of Chinese national security law on Hong Kong, [new restrictions](#) on Huawei 5G technologies, [clashes](#) between Indian and Chinese troops along their disputed border, and a multinational, cross-partisan group of parliamentarians focused on China, the [Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China](#). Juggling the many problems facing China at this moment requires nothing short of adroit diplomatic engagement.

Moreover, this undiplomatic initiative comes at a time when the United States is seen as performing poorly in coping with the simultaneous crises of the Covid-19 pandemic and a severe economic recession. Yet rather than offering an alternative to the current US administration, the Wolf Warriors seem dead-set on emulating aspects of it; the Trump administration's "America first" agenda is not entirely dissimilar to that of Beijing's Wolf Warriors. Neither seems likely to produce the international successes they seek.

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