



## XI JINPING'S TOP FIVE FOREIGN POLICY MISTAKES

BY DENNY ROY

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Xi Jinping's aggressive foreign policy is stimulating increased international opposition to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) agenda, undoing years of effort by Chinese officials to assure regional governments that a stronger China will be peaceful and non-domineering. Here are five examples of Xi's self-defeating decision-making in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) foreign relations.

### Wolf Warriorism

Xi has [ordered his diplomats](#) to demonstrate “fighting spirit” and to “dare to show their swords.” Accordingly, over the past two years Chinese diplomats have aimed jarring insults and threats at various countries, not just Western democracies, but also Brazil, Kazakhstan, Iran, Pakistan, Venezuela, Thailand, and South Korea. The result is unsurprising. Public opinion surveys by the [Pew Research Center](#) and other pollsters show a marked increase in negative feeling toward China since 2019 in Europe, Australia, Japan, the United States, and other countries. Former Singaporean senior foreign ministry official [Bilihari Kausikan](#) said “China's ‘[Wolf Warriors](#)’ are doing a better job than any American diplomat of arousing anti-Chinese feelings around the world.” Chinese diplomats could defend their country's actions differently. Instead, Wolf Warriorism acts as an extension of domestic politics, with little regard for harm done to China's international prestige and relationships.

### Galwan Valley skirmish

According to Indian sources, this [June 2020 battle](#) on the disputed Sino-Indian border began when Chinese troops ambushed and killed an Indian colonel who had approached the Chinese unarmed and in good faith to negotiate de-escalation. Whether or not Beijing ordered this particular act, a PRC policy of creeping expansionism made an eventual confrontation almost inevitable absent a tacit Indian surrender. For years the Chinese have built infrastructure to facilitate quick military mobilization in disputed areas. The Chinese government found it intolerable when the Indian side started to do the same in response.

The clash caused a long-term hardening of Indian attitudes and policy toward China. The Indian government cancelled several [infrastructure construction deals](#) with China, halted the purchase of [Huawei](#) information technology equipment, and sought to economically decouple from China in other important sectors. New Delhi re-committed itself to blocking Chinese expansion into disputed areas. India has signaled a deeper commitment to the Quad, was quick to express support for the AUKUS agreement, and now sends warships into the South China Sea—acts that Beijing finds threatening.

### South China Sea policy

Having already distinguished itself as the most aggressive of the South China Sea claimants, Beijing started building sizeable artificial islands in 2013. China has now [installed](#) military facilities, including runways, docks, barracks, and missile batteries, on at least three reefs in the Spratly group. The PRC's South China Sea policy highlights Beijing choosing to impose its will upon weaker neighbors rather than seeking a mutually acceptable compromise. It is also another example of the Chinese government disregarding an international agreement to which China was a signatory. Beijing has argued that China's “historic rights” to the South China Sea take precedence over the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and contemptuously rejected the 2016 ruling against China by the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

The upside of these outposts, located far from mainland China, is uncertain. They might be more liability than asset to the PRC in a time of conflict. As for the downside: more than any other single Chinese policy, the new bases convinced international observers that PRC foreign policy under Xi was taking an aggressive turn, with more emphasis on winning rather than managing strategic disputes, and less effort to avoid alarming other governments in the Indo-Pacific.

### Taiwan

Rather than blazing a creative new solution to the cross-Strait dispute, the man celebrated for “Xi Jinping Thought” has simply doubled-down on his predecessors’ demonstrably failed policies. Xi maintains that unification is essential to China’s “rejuvenation,” although the PRC is abundantly prosperous and secure without controlling Taiwan. He has continued to insist that Taiwan’s destiny is “one country, two systems” (1C2S). Taiwan’s people, however, never supported 1C2S, and the [destruction](#) of Hong Kong’s liberties has thoroughly discredited the concept. That Xi would still speak of 1C2S in a message to Taiwan as recently as [Oct. 9](#) indicates a stunning intellectual and political sclerosis.

Finally, Xi has increased military pressure on Taiwan. This has deepened resentment on the island toward China and bolsters support for the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, which now holds both the presidency and a legislative majority. The heightened sense of danger has prodded Taiwan to implement [asymmetric defense](#), which will make it more capable of fighting off an attempted PRC invasion. The Biden administration has reaffirmed US support for Taiwan as “rock solid.” Even Japanese leaders are now [openly discussing](#) the increasing likelihood that Japan would help defend Taiwan.

Xi’s Taiwan policy works to eliminate possible solutions other than a war that, even in the best-case scenario, would be disastrous for China.

### Economic coercion against Australia

In April 2020, [Canberra displeased Beijing](#) by calling for an inquiry into the origins of the pandemic. The

PRC retaliated by [cutting imports](#) of 10 Australian products. As in previous cases, Chinese officials implausibly denied that the restrictions were politically motivated, a gratuitous show of duplicity.

The consequences of this Chinese policy were worse for China than for Australia. Canberra did not accommodate the [14 political demands](#) made by the Chinese embassy in November 2020. Australia suffered little from the import bans, finding other buyers for much of the supply turned away by China. Australian Treasurer Josh Frydenberg recently described the damage done to Australia’s economy as “[relatively modest](#).” In addition to the reputation cost to Beijing, the Chinese government’s campaign against Australia drew greater international attention to the dangers of doing business with China. [Power shortages](#) in China during autumn 2021 are partly due to a coal shortage, worsened by the sanction against Australian coal imports. The attempt to punish Australia has increased momentum for addressing China’s systematic violation of both the spirit and the letter of its World Trade Organization obligations. Canberra’s refusal to capitulate may serve as an inspiration for other governments under Chinese economic pressure over a political disagreement, diminishing the usefulness of this tactic.

What drives Xi? First, he has relied heavily on pandering to Chinese nationalism. Appearing to defend China’s interests against challenges by foreigners makes the Xi regime more popular and implicitly makes opposing Xi seem unpatriotic.

Second, Xi rules during a period of Chinese hubris. By 2012, when Xi assumed leadership, China was the world’s second-largest economy and on track to surpass the United States for the top spot. Beijing had hosted the Olympic Games in 2008, China’s coming-out party as a world power, while the financial crisis in 2007-2008 convinced Chinese observers that America was in rapid decline even as China surged ahead.

A third contributing factor is hyper-authoritarianism. Xi has concentrated numerous decision-making powers in himself, built up a personality cult, and prioritized political correctness over pragmatic analysis. The resulting political climate is not

conducive to advisors warning Xi that he is making mistakes.

Xi's goals include increasing China's international stature and quashing international criticism. He says he wants to cultivate the image of a "credible, loveable and respectable China." Xi seeks to maximize China's access to global markets and technology. He wants to hasten the withdrawal of US strategic influence from the region. He wants the world to believe "China will never seek hegemony, expansion, or a sphere of influence."

Xi's major foreign policy errors, however, have undermined these goals. The PRC government under Xi has indulged nationalistic domestic public opinion at the risk of sabotaging the important longer-term national objectives that Xi has specified as central to his "China dream."

A PRC that other states perceive as aggressive is engendering coordinated strategic opposition. This will make it harder for China to become a regional and global leader. If other governments believe China is expansionist, they will believe every strategic gain by China emboldens Beijing to strive for more. During Xi's tenure this logic has become commonplace in discussions about Beijing's designs on Taiwan and the South China Sea. There is also an important economic and technological cost to China, as worried trade partners decouple to reduce their vulnerability to PRC coercion and to avoid selling China the rope that China might hang them with.

Chinese remember Mao's leadership as 70% good. Xi may have difficulty reaching even that modest standard.

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