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Opinion – Making Sense of China's 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy

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RAGUL PALANISAMI, AUG 10 2020

Chinese diplomacy in the past decades is known for its blandness and use of long verbose statements. Recent years has witnessed the emergence of a new brand of Chinese diplomat. Unlike the older generation who used 'conservative, passive, and low-key diplomacy', these so-called 'wolf warriors' are known for their 'aggressive, proactive and high-profile' tactics. They are adept in using social media platforms like twitter to defend Chinese national interests. During the Covid-19 pandemic, these wolf warrior diplomats are seen to have used social media platforms to full effect to respond aggressively to US slander against China. Additionally, they were responsible for spreading misinformation about the origin of the coronavirus and the western response to the pandemic. In this manner, the pandemic season has seen heightened activism from Chinese diplomats in the global arena.

It is noteworthy to draw a comparison between the Chinese military aggressiveness in the period beginning with the global financial crisis of 2007–08, and China's 'wolf warrior' diplomacy at the peak of the coronavirus pandemic. In both periods China was noticed to have come out relatively unscathed compared to western liberal democracies. This prompted the Chinese government at both instances to promote their governance model as the best alternative to the West. Speculation is therefore ripe that the pandemic could push forward the much-anticipated power transition between the US and China.

In the post-financial crisis period, China became more assertive in its claims over the disputed territories in the South and East China seas. Yet, it is important to draw attention to the fact that China's soft power took a beating because of its aggressive stance. It lost much of the good will cultivated over the years through its benevolent acts towards its neighbors. The idea of China's 'peaceful rise' began to be questioned by the international community. It can also be said that this bellicose nature of Chinese behavior was the reason behind President Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' policy. More than anything, this changed behavior was perceived by China watchers as signaling a marked shift from the dictum of Deng Xiaoping: 'Hide your strength, Bide your time'.

A scholarly discourse emerged aimed at discerning the reason behind China's supposed 'irrational' behavior. Observing the continuation in Chinese aggressiveness, Edward Luttwak made the contention that the country is struck with 'Great-state autism', triggered by its strategic culture (belief in centrality and hierarchical superiority) and its inability to process information simultaneously from internal and external events. The syndrome is characterized by 'persistent insensitivities within China's top leadership to foreign sensitivities'. In other words, Luttwak argued that the Chinese leadership has grown indifferent to the mounting opposition from its neighbors to its aggressive stance.

Additionally, as pointed out by Thomas Christensen, China's post-recession 'irrational' behavior must have had its roots in domestic dynamics like the rise of nationalism, lack of bureaucratic coordination, pluralism in foreign policy decision-making, and rogue PLA. On the contrary, Aaron Friedberg argued that China's assertiveness was not a spontaneous response triggered by domestic factors, but a well planned strategy executed after its leaders perceived a relative power gain for China in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis. Moreover, he contended that the continuation of assertiveness might be because of the Chinese tendency to evaluate success over a longer time horizon. Thus, by calling China's behavior to be 'rational', Friedberg refuted Luttwak's claims that China is suffering from great-state autism.

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Written by Ragul Palanisami

China’s political system has become more centralized under President Xi Jinping, who became the General Secretary of CCP and the President of China during the leadership transition of 2012. Under Xi, a Central National Security Commission (CNSC) was established in November 2012. This body falls under the Central Committee of the CCP and reports directly to the politburo and the standing committee. The CNSC also marked the subordination of the PLA to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Like CNSC, a Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC) was established in 2018, replacing the former Leading Small Group on foreign affairs. Like CNSC, the CFAC is also headed by Xi and includes other key figures in the CCP. Since its formation, CFAC began to function as the key institution coordinating Chinese foreign policy. It also marked the centralization of foreign policy decision making under the CCP.

One possible drawback is that in the future party loyalty could be priced over regional expertise. This was somewhat visible even from the composition of the CFAC with people with no credible foreign policy expertise. Some argue that the creation of CFAC has added an additional layer of bureaucracy to an already inefficient policy process. However, the possible benefits include clear outside signaling and a predictable Chinese foreign policy.

By observing the changes brought under President Xi, it can be said that neither bureaucratic competition nor the lack of coordination could be the reason behind the wolf warrior diplomacy. At the same time, centralization of foreign policy decision-making under the CCP sends a clear signal that the recent diplomatic aggressiveness is sanctioned by the higher echelons of the party. Additionally, the generalistic nature of wolf warrior diplomacy rules out the possibility that multiple interest groups might have influenced decision making. However, the impact of nationalism cannot be ruled out completely given the decades meticulous efforts to cultivate it within the Chinese population. Moreover, the aggressive diplomatic demeanor could have also served as a tool to divert the attention of the Chinese population from the economic grievances wrought earlier by the trade war and later on by the coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing protests in Hong Kong.

However, the puzzle still remains as to why China persists with the existing policy of diplomatic aggressiveness despite the evidence that such behavior in the times of pandemic is tarnishing its international image? To answer the puzzle, it seems worthwhile to investigate further the decade-old debate on rationality-irrationality in Chinese diplomatic behavior.

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