

# Why China Should Re-Strategize its Wolf Warrior Diplomacy

Written by David (Trace) Held III

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DAVID (TRACE) HELD III, JAN 12 2021

“It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”<sup>[1]</sup> Indeed, Thucydides’ observation of great power conflict over two millennia ago reigns true today, as the swift rise of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s economy and leverage within international institutions alarm the United States -- and thereby the Western society as whole – of its impending supplanting as the world’s hegemony. Since Covid-19’s global spread in particular, Chinese diplomats have confirmed the West’s apprehensions by indicating through online discourse and hard power initiatives that China possesses an amplifying “ambition and capability to reform the global governance system to reflect Beijing’s priorities and values.”<sup>[2]</sup> Yet, China does not desire direct confrontation with the West on all the fronts the diplomats expound. Rather, a proportion of China’s Wolf Warrior Diplomacy (WWD) – China’s aggressive foreign policy named after a recent action movie – stem from a Xi administration tactic to resolve domestic disputes. Nevertheless, continuing to employ this tactic will ultimately deliver disastrous consequences for Xi and could hinder the PRC’s ability to achieve both the domestic stability and reframing of international institutions it desires.

To understand why a Chinese diplomat would describe Australia as “gum stuck to the bottom of China’s shoe” to stir up nationalist sentiments, three primary origins of WWD are required.<sup>[3]</sup> First, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is performing a regime ‘legitimacy justification pivot.’ Since the outset of the Deng Xiaoping era in 1978, the CCP derived its legitimacy from swiftly bolstering the Chinese standard of living, particularly in the economic sector. In recent years however, this position has proved untenable as the 2008 Financial Crisis, the US Trade War, and COVID-19 battered the PRC’s Gross Domestic Product growth rate from 9.5 per cent over the past 40 years down to 1 per cent growth in 2020.<sup>[4]</sup> Likewise, other domestic government fumbblings in censorship, social policies, human rights, and legal affairs have compelled legitimacy to be an “overriding issue” above other Party goals.<sup>[5]</sup> Indeed Xi noted, “if we cannot solve [domestic] problems and let them get worse, the people will not trust and support us.”<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, with a rising lack of “social cohesion,” basing legitimacy off obtaining nationalist goals internationally has proven to be a “powerful legitimating ideology.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Second, concurrently, Xi faces legitimacy crises of his own with the populous and elites. Framing himself as a populist through the ‘Tigers and Flies Campaign’ – a crusade to eliminate corrupt officials – as well as appearing to pursue international Chinese objectives, has cemented his rule in the eyes of the average citizen. Still, Xi’s power consolidation through dispensing of corrupt officials and garnering populist support has “created enemies among the ruling elite.”<sup>[8]</sup> Thus, as additional domestic reforms risk exasperating elites further, Xi’s doubling down on foreign aspirations both obtains additional populist support and insulates Xi from “dissatisfied elites, who recognize that toppling a popular leader” forwarding a strong international Chinese agenda “would invite backlash.”<sup>[9]</sup>

The third and final pillar of WWD emanates from propagated anti-Western nationalism tied to China’s rising power. Commencing with China’s embarrassing defeat in the First Opium Wars in 1842, the nation endured over 100 years of Japanese and Western occupation and bullying, both diplomatically and economically, in the infamous ‘Century of Humiliation.’<sup>[10]</sup> Consequently, a staple of Chinese nationalism since the late 1800s has been the eviction of other predominant nations from Chinese affairs and territorial claims.<sup>[11]</sup> The CCP actively propagates the Chinese people’s desire to “return to a normal state of affairs,” where China reigns as the world’s hegemony like it did during

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the Dynasty eras (emphasized throughout Chinese history textbooks).<sup>[12]</sup> Allowing passionate nationalism to fester online and in protests, the CCP now governs a population who, though not inherently anti-Western warmongers, are not opposed to employing “force to defend their territorial interests, including Taiwan.”<sup>[13]</sup> While venting legitimacy and patriot goals outwardly remains an effective tool for Xi and the CCP to ensure domestic stability, “a very nationalistic public makes foreigners very wary of China and harms China’s image.”<sup>[14]</sup>

Nevertheless, as explained, the Xi administration remains constrained to transform “Chinese diplomacy from conservative, passive, and low-key to assertive, proactive, and high-profile” to “signal high international status to boost domestic legitimacy.”<sup>[15]</sup> This strategy manifests itself in two activities. First, state diplomats unequivocally assert “bad consequences” and “firm counter measures” on Twitter and through official channels for those who oppose China’s stances on repression, human rights, territorial claims, and COVID-19’s origins.<sup>[16]</sup> Second, this slander is paired with Chinese hard power initiatives for construction of artificial islands for military bases in the South China Sea, ‘The Belt and Road Initiative,’ and Chinese entry into dual-purpose (military and private sector) technologies. Undeniably, China has succeeded in mobilizing the entirety of society to exhibit the “fighting spirit” towards the international community Xi’s described (that clandestinely aids him, and the CCP’s legitimacy claims).<sup>[17]</sup>

Opposed to some scholars’ claims the rhetoric aspect is a coalition of several diplomats lashing out beyond what The Party wants, there remains no question WWD is coordinated. Beyond the aforementioned reasons why the PRC must “exaggerate its strength,” it is inconceivable such provocative statements could be issued by members of an authoritarian foreign policy apparatus without a superior’s approval.<sup>[18]</sup> The Central National Security Commission and the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, established by Xi himself to adhere directly to the Politburo and “key figures in the CCP,” possess the ability to promptly suppress any unruly diplomat alleging the United States Military planted COVID-19 within Wuhan.<sup>[19]</sup>

Furthermore, domestic turmoil prompting governments to assemble an external belligerency facade is found not only in modern China and Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* with Athens, but throughout history as well. In German Historian Fritz Fischer’s book, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, he articulates Imperial Germany’s “dysfunctional domestic politics” induced its aggressive foreign policy before the First World War.<sup>[20]</sup> Half a century later, when President Harry Truman determined “ways to rally” the American people’s support for his Cold War strategy, Senator Arthur Vandenberg, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee offered similar advice: “Make a personal appearance before Congress and scare the hell out of the American people.”<sup>[21]</sup> Hence, Imperial Germany’s case provides a counterpart to how internal instability forces governments to promote threatening foreign policies while the United States’ example highlights how politicians, whether Truman or Xi, comprehend the benefits of expounding on foreign dangers to stir public reinforcement for the necessity of their leadership.

What proves unusual about the PRC’s positioning however is top officials’ private persistent of downplaying the assertive rhetoric as mere tactic of ‘diversionary aggression.’ The Editor of the Chinese *Global Times*, the government’s official newspaper, instructed U.S. Ambassador Huntsman “not to be concerned” as Chinese combativeness is simply “necessary to satisfy the Chinese people.” In a similar fashion, Organization Department Minister Li Yuanchao informed U.S. National Security Adviser Tom Donilon that China “would not challenge the United States for global leadership.” Interestingly, Dr. Erin Baggott Carter from the School of International Relations at the University of Southern California noted “Beijing agreed to help with an Iran resolution at the United Nations, on one condition: that it could keep its assistance private.”<sup>[22]</sup> In her research, she discovers the PRC quadruples its positive diplomacy in the month following a ‘diversionary aggressive’ action. Carter’s conclusion that upwards of 40% of PRC aggression (both in rhetoric and in passive-aggressive military actions such as an aircraft fly by) could be attributed to ‘diversionary aggression’ confirms the State both relies upon, and must frequently invoke Chinese nationalism by performing belligerent demonstrations beyond its intended purview. Still, undeniably, PRC initiatives like the Belt and Road and increased participation in international agencies, global health, and trade regulations demonstrate the CCP’s serious commitment to establish itself as a “strong country” on the world stage as announced by President Xi.<sup>[23]</sup>

Regardless of whether a verbal or physical confrontation came about due to a Xi or The Party’s ploy to regain credibility, over-reliance upon the WWD tactic proves unsustainable. A devastating geopolitical confinement will

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ensue for PRC and its rulers should they continue to play the nationalist card. Domestically, constant “diplomatic spats with foreign powers” will deplete the reserve of times Xi can invoke “the peaceful identity of the Chinese people” to regain peace before the nationalist cries muffle the PRC’s messages.<sup>[24]</sup> As previously mentioned, with the CCP’s ‘legitimacy pivot’ shift to include achieving nationalist ends, eventually, some ends will have to be achieved to sustain legitimacy. Whatever bold maneuver the PRC performs when that time arises will surely affront the international community—such as an invasion of Taiwan. Yet, if WWD persists, the international community might already be at the last straw with the PRC, as current WWD actions continuously damage “China’s global image.”<sup>[25]</sup>

Equally as detrimental, Australian Prime Minister Rudd notes, “Chinese soft power runs the risk of being shredded.”<sup>[26]</sup> Unsurprisingly, the “war of competing narratives,...competing political systems and...competing ideologies” in both soft and hard power arenas (like the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel) has not only damaged China’s reputation, but also squandered some “geopolitical advantages China could’ve gained from” a Post-Covid-19 world where China appears to have beaten the virus while the U.S. continues to suffer.<sup>[27]</sup> Now, disinformation in Africa about COVID-19’s origins are rejected by its intended audience. Additionally, the U.S. and E.U., formally disassociating, now resolve to formulate “a coherent and robust China stance” which rebukes China’s economic and global governance initiatives.<sup>[28]</sup>

In *Destined For War* Graham Allison recounts the ‘Thucydides Trap’ in describing Sino-American relations. In the past 500 years, a rising power threatening to displace a ruling one has resulted in war in twelve of the sixteen instances. Though a bleak statistic, he notes the four peaceful cases, three of which occurred in the 20th Century, derived from imaginative, amiable statecraft.<sup>[29]</sup> Forgetting Deng’s caution to ‘hide and bide’ while continuing to pursue WWD on the international stage against a multinational hegemonic coalition will only drive China down a path of capitulation from internal forces (like the Soviet Union) or external forces (like Germany). To safeguard against repeating the ‘Century of Humiliation’ replete with domestic turmoil and Western bullying, President Xi and the CCP – “the wolves” – must cultivate new tactics in redirecting nationalism and reframing China’s legitimacy.

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## Notes

[1] Allison, "Thucydides Trap."

[2] Ho, "China's Strategic Objectives in a Post COVID-19 World," 89; "Trace China's Rise to Power."

[3] IntelBrief: "The Rise of 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy."

[4] Bishop, "To Understand China's Aggressive Foreign Power"; Morrison, "China's Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States."

[5] Chhabra, "Global China."

[6] Yu, "Communist Party powered by history?"

[7] Yu.

[8] Carter, "Diversionary Aggression;" Bishop.

[9] Carter. "This dynamic was first observed by Machiavelli, who wrote that 'one of the most efficacious remedies that a prince can have against conspiracies is not to be hated and despised by the people.'" Carter.

[10] Ebrey, "Introduction to China's Modern History: Asia for Educators: Columbia University."

[11] Bulag, "Nationality," 152.

[12] Blaauw, "The driving forces behind China's foreign policy.;" Bulag, 156.

[13] Quek, "Nationalism in China is running high."

[14] Bajoria, "Nationalism in China."

[15] Bakken, "Rebranding China;" Zhiquan, "Interpreting China's 'Wolf-Warrior' Diplomacy."

[16] Dettmer, "China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy.;" Tran

[17] Sun; Zhiquan.

[18] Palanisami, "Making Sense of China's 'Wolf Warrior.;" Bakken.

[19] Ho, 90. Zhiquan; IntelBrief; Palanisami.

[20] Bishop.

[21] Preble, "Peace, War, and Liberty: Understanding U.S. Foreign Policy," 82-83.

[22] Carter.

[23] Bakken; Carter.

[24] Quek.

[25] Carter; Sun

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[26] VDettmer.

[27] Tran; Ziqun; IntelBrief.

[28] Laird; Lau, "Europe is ready."

[29] Allison.

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