COVER STORY

China's Wolfpack

Why are the people who should be most concerned about their country's reputation consistently acting in ways that undermine it?

BY PETER MARTIN — JUNE 20, 2021

Illustration by Sam Ward

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It was late afternoon in November 2018 when Rimbink Pato, Papua New Guinea's foreign minister, heard a loud commotion outside his door. Seconds later, four young Chinese diplomats burst uninvited into his office, demanding last-minute changes to the communiqué of the APEC summit, the Pacific's most important economic and political event.

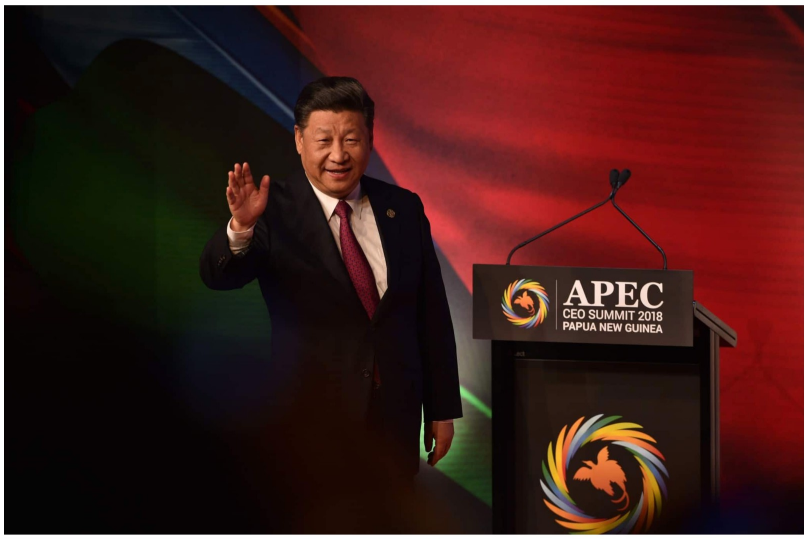
The Chinese diplomats believed some of the communique's wording about "unfair trade practices" targeted Beijing, and behind the scenes at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, whose members represent around 60 percent of the world's GDP, they had been wrangling for a change. Pato refused their requests for a private sit-down, arguing that bilateral negotiations with an individual delegation might jeopardize the country's neutrality as host. But, undeterred, the four diplomats decided to push their way into the foreign minister's office, calling out that they just needed two minutes of his time. Security guards had to ask the Chinese officials to leave, and police were later posted outside the door.

For China, it was a disastrous end to a summit that, by all accounts, should have been an easy win for the country. For years, China had been meticulously building its influence in Papua New Guinea by ramping up investment and building infrastructure. Chinese loans had funded hospitals, schools, and hydropower stations across the country. By the time the summit took place, the nation owed a quarter of its external debt to Beijing, and Xi Jinping, the president of China and head of the ruling Communist Party, seemed poised to make the most of the international opportunity on friendly territory.

Xi had even made a grand entrance as the first foreign leader to land in Papua New Guinea. Ahead of his arrival, local newspapers carried an op-ed in his name, which hailed the "rapid growth" in ties as the "epitome of China's overall relations with Pacific island countries." Once on the ground, his motorcade, which included two Hongqi ("red flag") limousines air-lifted from China, sped from the airport to the hotel along a Chinese-funded highway past the fluttering flags of both countries. Xi drove past crowds of cheering high school students and billboards of himself shaking hands with the country's president. His hotel was decorated with red lanterns and an elaborate Chinese gate.

By contrast, Donald Trump, the U.S. president, skipped the APEC meeting altogether, sending Mike Pence, the vice president, instead. Trump had spent the two years leading up to the meeting undoing much of the goodwill America had developed in the region, including withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and launching a trade war with China that forced Pacific nations to choose between two powers they could not afford to offend. Trump had also personally insulted America's partners across the region, hanging up halfway through a February 2017 phone call with Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull and branding Canada's Justin Trudeau "very dishonest" and "weak."

Xi Jinping had been using public appearances since Trump's surprise election victory in November 2016 to contrast China's approach to the "America first" protectionism espoused by his American counterpart, and APEC was no exception. At the summit, he delivered his standard speech on the importance of open markets and globalization. And the audience of global executives and political elites applauded when he told them, without naming names, that implementing tariffs and breaking up supply chains was "short-sighted" and "doomed to failure."



Chinese President Xi Jinping arrives to make his keynote speech for the CEO Summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Port Moresby on November 17, 2018.
Credit: PETER PARKS/AFP via Getty Images

While this display was largely under China's control, the ruckus over the communiqué was not. Publicly, Papua New Guinea's foreign minister sought to downplay the incident, telling reporters it was "not an issue." China's foreign ministry even denied that the incident ever occurred, calling it "a rumor spread by some people with a hidden agenda."

But privately, the country's officials described China's behavior throughout the negotiations as "bullying." As reporters waited for the outcome of the summit, Trudeau eventually confirmed that negotiations over the communiqué had collapsed. "There are differing visions on particular elements," the Canadian prime minister said with understatement. For the first time since leaders began attending the annual summit in 1993, no statement was issued.

The APEC summit should have been an opportunity for China to boost its reputation. But the debacle was just one of a series of setbacks for Chinese diplomacy in the months before and after the summit. Two months earlier, at the Pacific Islands Forum in the Micronesian microstate of Nauru, China's envoy had walked out of a meeting when the host refused to let him speak ahead of another nation's prime minister. The president of Nauru described the Chinese diplomat as "very insolent" and a "bully."

In the months after the Papua New Guinea incident, China's ambassador to Canada publicly accused his hosts of "white supremacy." China's representative in Sweden, Gui Congyou, labeled the country's police "inhumane" and blasted its "so-called freedom of expression." In the space of just two years, Gui was summoned by Sweden's foreign ministry more than 40 times while three of the country's political parties called for him to be expelled. Unabashed, he told Swedish public radio, "we treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we have shotguns."

While these aggressive displays won plaudits at home, they compromised China's efforts to cast itself as a peaceful power. The foreign media began to brand this new confrontational approach "wolf warrior diplomacy" after a series of Chinese action movies that depicted Rambo-like heroes battling China's enemies at home and abroad. The tagline for one of the films, which was wildly popular in China, read, "Even though a thousand miles away, anyone who affronts China will pay."

Source: Twitter

The "wolf warrior" moniker seemed fitting as the behavior of Chinese diplomats grew even more combative in the wake of Covid-19. Beijing's envoys hit back hard at suggestions China was to blame for the spread of the virus. Some did so on Twitter: "You speak in such a way that you look like part of the virus and you will be eradicated just like virus. Shame on you," Zha Liyou, China's consul-general in Kolkata, India, tweeted at one user who criticized China.

Others vented their frustration through embassy websites: an anonymously authored text posted on the website of the Chinese embassy in France falsely accused French retirement home staff of leaving old people to die, sparking public anger in France and a rebuke from the country's foreign ministry.

Most provocatively of all, Zhao Lijian, a recently appointed foreign ministry spokesman, suggested that the virus might have been spread deliberately by the U.S. Army, prompting fury in Donald Trump's Oval Office and worldwide alarm about Beijing's role in spreading disinformation.

The behavior of Chinese diplomats has helped fuel a global backlash against Beijing. Reinhard Buetikofer, a German lawmaker who chairs the European Parliament's delegation for relations with China, said the foreign ministry's "extremely aggressive" behavior combined with the Communist Party's "hard line propaganda" had helped turn European opinion against the Asian nation. Its conduct, he said, spoke to the "pervasiveness of an attitude that does not purvey the will to create partnerships, but the will to tell people what to do." A global poll released in October 2020 showed that negative perceptions of China hit record highs in the United States and eight other developed economies including Germany, Britain, South Korea, Australia, and Canada.

These setbacks matter. As global politics is increasingly defined by Sino-American rivalry, the ability to compete diplomatically will help shape the history of the twenty-first century. Taken together with economic, military, technological, and ideological prowess, diplomacy is a key part of what makes any power great. American strategists have long defined it as a core

element of any nation's power: diplomatic, informational, military, and economic capabilities are often reduced to the acronym "DIME."

China knows diplomacy is important, and it's spending big to compete. Between 2012 and 2017, Beijing nearly doubled its spending on diplomacy to $7.8 billion, even as the United States slashed funding for the State Department. In 2019, its diplomatic network overtook that of the United States, with 276 embassies and consulates around the world. Just two years earlier, it had ranked third behind America and France.

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Yet, instead of winning friends, these "wolf warrior" diplomats have become symbols of the threat posed by a rising China. Why are the very people who should be most concerned about their country's reputation consistently acting in ways that clearly undermine it? Why is this emerging superpower struggling to take advantage of the diplomatic opportunities presented to it at an unprecedented moment of global change?

To understand what's going wrong, we need to step into the shoes of the country's diplomats.

The Civilian Army

Chinese envoys are behaving so undiplomatically because they are unable to extricate themselves from the constraints of a secretive, paranoid political system. While their actions can sometimes seem aggressive — even bizarre — from the outside, they make perfect sense when seen from a domestic perspective. Understanding why involves looking at how China's political system has shaped the behavior of its diplomats since the earliest days of the People's Republic.

In 1949, Mao Zedong established Communist China after decades of bitter political struggle with Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) rivals. The Communists had spent much of this time living secretive, underground lives in fear of capture and persecution. After being nearly obliterated in 1934, they were forced into a humiliating retreat across China's remote heartlands before rebuilding their revolutionary movement and eventually seizing on Japan's 1937 invasion to stage a comeback. Despite the Communist Party's eventual victory in 1949, the new regime feared that its rule could be undermined by class enemies at home. What's more, it faced the threat of invasion by the Kuomintang, which had established a new capital on the island of Taiwan, and an increasingly hostile, anti-communist United States.

Still, Mao's new regime badly needed to build bridges with the outside world. Establishing ties with capitalist nations would strengthen its claim to be the sole legitimate government of China, a status contested by the Kuomintang on Taiwan. Strong diplomatic ties with the communist world could bring military protection for the new regime, as well as access to the

Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China during a grand ceremony on October 1, 1949, in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.
Credit: Hou Bo via Wikipedia

crucial foreign technologies and expertise needed to modernize the country. Communist China's approach to diplomacy was forged by this imperative to establish relationships around the world while jealously guarding the Party's hard-won victory.

The man charged with squaring this circle was Zhou Enlai, one of the Communist Party's most experienced revolutionaries and the founding father of modern Chinese diplomacy. The task was especially daunting given that the new government had no diplomats to speak of. Acting on Mao's instructions, Zhou cast aside any Kuomintang diplomats who had opted to remain on mainland China, and instead set about creating a diplomatic corps from scratch. Other than a small group of Party officials who had experience dealing with foreigners, the bulk of Zhou's diplomatic corps would be made up of fresh graduates, ex-soldiers, and hardened peasant revolutionaries. Most spoke no foreign languages and some had never even met a foreigner.

Zhou's task was doubly daunting because, in the eyes of the Chinese public, diplomacy had often been associated with weakness and capitulation to foreign powers. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese envoys had represented the crumbling Qing Dynasty by signing agreements that gave foreign powers preferential access to the Chinese market, extra-legal privileges on Chinese soil, and even control over portions of the country's territory such as Hong Kong. The imperial capital of Beijing itself had been sacked on more than one occasion. The Communists came to power promising to end bullying at the hands of foreign imperialists and declaring that China had "stood up." In order to distance the new regime from this humiliating legacy, the diplomacy of the People's Republic would need to win the respect of other nations while never allowing its own diplomats to show weakness.

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Zhou's solution was to model Chinese diplomacy on the military force that had propelled the Communists to power: the People's Liberation Army. He told the new recruits to think and act like "the People's Liberation Army in civilian clothing." They would be combative when needed and disciplined to a fault. They would instinctively observe hierarchy and report to their superiors on everything they did. When necessary, they would report on each other. Most important, the idea of working as a "civilian army" underscored the fact that the first loyalty of Chinese diplomats would always be to the Communist Party. As every good Communist knew, when Chairman Mao declared that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," he had added that "the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party."

The idea of a "civilian army" proved a potent and lasting metaphor for Chinese diplomacy. It provided Zhou's ragtag group with a way to feel proud of what they were doing and some sense of how to do it. A little like the "mission statement" pinned to the wall of a tech startup, it gave them a way to scale their organization quickly while conveniently ignoring the fact that they didn't really know what they were doing.

"They applied the same discipline to the foreign ministry that they applied to the military," explains Gao Zhikai, a former foreign ministry interpreter. "The discipline applied to the organization and also to every individual. The pressure is huge: everyone is watching everyone else to make sure no one is fooling around."

Using this rubric, the Communists found a way to communicate with the outside world while minimizing the risks of doing so. Zhou encouraged a style among his diplomats that one cadre aptly described as "controlled openness." Chinese diplomats were expected to adhere to a rule that forbade them from meeting alone with foreign counterparts. Instead, they worked in pairs to ensure that if anyone deviated too far from the Party line, or shared sensitive information, the person next to them was there to report it. Diplomats were instructed to ask permission before they acted, even on the most trivial matters, and to always report what they said, did, and heard to their superiors. They were banned from dating or marrying foreigners. They were told to stick rigidly to pre-approved talking points, even when they knew these often failed to resonate with foreign audiences.

Zhou Enlai, via *Wikipedia*

Born of necessity more than 70 years ago, these rules and practices are still in place today. Zhou's approach has survived and evolved through revolution, famine, capitalist reforms, and the rise of China as a global power.

"We're very different to other ministries," one diplomat told me. "We're unusual in that we've had a strong culture that's lasted since 1949."

Winning Influence While Losing Friends

There are real strengths to the Chinese approach to diplomacy. Namely, its diplomats bring unrivaled discipline to the pursuit of their goals, and as a result, foreign interlocutors are never left in any doubt about China's stance on the country's core interests.

"They can be very charming and professional," one European diplomat told me. "Dealing with them can be exhausting because they won't deviate from the official line for even a second."

What's more, China's disciplined approach extends all across its central government agencies, hiding most inter-agency conflicts from the world and enhancing China's ability to present a united front in negotiations. It's a powerful combination in a world beset by disruption and uncertainty.

Indeed, at times, Chinese diplomacy has performed impressively. In the 1950s, China undertook a charm offensive that won it friends in the developing world and helped build support for the Communist Party as the internationally recognized government of China. In the period after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, Chinese diplomats helped rehabilitate their country in the eyes of the world, kickstarting a nearly two-decade run of successes that culminated in China's hosting of the Summer Olympic Games in 2008.

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>
> *— An anonymous European diplomat*

Yet the system also has major weaknesses. China's approach to diplomacy makes its envoys effective at formulating demands, but poorly equipped to win hearts and minds. Their fear of looking weak in front of Party leaders and the Chinese public makes them focus excessively on small tactical wins at the expense of strategic victories; their constant repetition of official talking points is unpersuasive at best and, at worst, looks like bullying; and their limited space to improvise, show flexibility, or take the initiative leaves them unable to tailor their approach to different audiences.

These constraints matter because they cut to the heart of what it means to conduct diplomacy. Daniele Varè, an early twentieth-century Italian diplomat, described it as "the art of letting someone else have your way." Chas Freeman, a veteran American diplomat, elaborated on the point: "Diplomacy is a political performing art that informs and determines the decisions of other states and peoples. It shapes their perceptions and calculations so that they do what we want them to do because they come to see doing so as in their own best interest."

Judged by these standards, China's political system sets severe limits on the performance of its diplomats. Ultimately, it's a system that's better at silencing critics than persuading others to share its point of view, a system that leaves the Party with tremendous international influence but few true friends. This is true for China on a state-to-state level — the closest thing it has to an alliance is with North Korea; its closest relationship is with Pakistan. It's also true on a personal level: "You know, I don't think I ever really got to know anyone well," another senior European official said at the end of a four-decade career dealing with Chinese diplomats. "I played tennis with a couple of people in the 1990s, but I wasn't able to sustain those relationships. There's no one I could really call a friend."

The system performs particularly badly at times of political tension in Beijing, when Chinese diplomats find themselves more concerned with protecting themselves from charges of disloyalty than improving their country's reputation. This impulse played out most dramatically during the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution. As diplomats watched Mao push Chinese politics in an ever more radical direction, they followed his lead in their interactions with foreigners by barking slogans and handing out copies of the Chairman's Little Red Book. Eventually, the tight discipline of the foreign ministry broke down so completely that junior diplomats locked ambassadors in cellars, forced them to clean toilets, and beat them until they coughed up blood.

Today, as Xi Jinping pushes China in a more authoritarian direction at home and promotes a new, more assertive, global role for the country, many of the forces that previously held China back on the international stage are once again resurfacing. Now that Xi has secured power for life, any ambitious diplomat must appear to be on the right side of his political agenda, as there is little prospect of waiting him out. Plus, with Chinese politics becoming an increasingly repressive and frightening place, the costs of getting on the wrong side of Xi have become ever more apparent. Under his anti-graft campaign, political disloyalty has been treated as a form of corruption, with more than 1.5 million officials punished. Diplomats have had to sit through "self-criticism" sessions in the foreign ministry and "inspection tours" that test their loyalty to the Party and willingness to follow orders.

As such, the impulse for Chinese diplomats to follow Xi's lead is rooted in fear as well as ambition. And the result is that the country's envoys have taken a more assertive and even belligerent tone to prove their loyalty to the leadership. Much like their predecessors, they have handed out copies of books about "Xi Jinping Thought" at diplomatic events; they have waxed lyrical about Xi's leadership in meetings with foreign counterparts; and they have shouted at and insulted foreign politicians rather than risk looking weak.

"Beijing rewards diplomats that are aggressive advocates of China's views and scorns those that it perceives as overly timid," explains Ryan Hass, who served as a China expert on President Barack Obama's National Security Council. "We seem to be watching China's

diplomats matching the mood of the moment in Beijing."

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Given all this, you might expect Chinese diplomats to relish the "wolf warrior" label. They don't. To many, it's just the latest example of foreigners refusing to treat China fairly in the court of international opinion. "We think it's really unfair," one foreign ministry official told me. "We work so hard to improve China's image and explain our policies, but it doesn't matter what we say. Whatever we do, America and its allies will criticize us."

Le Yucheng, the foreign ministry's top vice minister, called the term a "discourse trap that aims to prevent us from fighting back" in a December 2020 speech. "I suspect these people have not awoken from their dreams 100 years ago," he said.

This frustration is understandable. In terms of credentials, today's Chinese diplomats are up with the best of their international counterparts. Many hold advanced degrees from Georgetown University or the London School of Economics, and have spent years mastering foreign languages ranging from Czech to Indonesian. They have invested much of their lives studying the countries to which they are posted and often care deeply about China's reputation. On a personal level, they can be suave, sophisticated, and even funny.

Quietly, many understand that their behavior is contributing to a global backlash against China. Yuan Nansheng, China's former consul general in San Francisco, voiced the concerns of many inside China's foreign ministry in September 2020 when he warned that "if we let populism and extreme nationalism flourish freely in China, the international community could misinterpret this as Beijing pursuing 'China First'," referring to Trump's "America First" policy. Yuan called for a return to the low-key approach to diplomacy the country had followed in the 1990s and early 2000s. "Chinese diplomacy needs to be stronger, not just tougher," he said.

It is this contrast between the impressive abilities of many Chinese diplomats and the stilted way they behave in press appearances and official meetings that make China's "wolf warriors" such a curious phenomenon. With deep-seated feelings of inferiority and frustration at the difficulties of making China's case to the world, the human face of Chinese diplomacy must interact between a closed society and the more open outside world. Which is why, in the end, it is the Chinese system, not the shortcomings of any particular individual or group of individuals, that is holding the country back. Arrogant but brittle, entitled but insecure, Chinese diplomacy portends the kind of power China is set to become.

Peter Martin is a political reporter for Bloomberg News. He has written extensively on escalating tensions in the US-China relationship and reported from China's border with North Korea and its far-western region of Xinjiang. His new book China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy came out on June 10th.

COVER STORY

Pole Position

BY EYCK FREYMANN

In public, Chinese diplomats and climate negotiators deny that they see any link between climate change and geopolitics. But there is a deeply cynical consensus within China's academic and policy communities that climate change creates geopolitical opportunities that China can exploit — and must exploit before its rivals do. Greenland was the proof of concept for this strategy. And it caught the U.S. flat-footed.

THE BIG PICTURE

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Q & A

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