Q & A

Peter Martin on China's 'Civilian Army'

The political reporter and author talks about how 'Wolf Warrior' tactics aren't entirely new and why China's political system sets an upper limit on the effectiveness of its diplomats.

BY ANDREW PEAPLE — JUNE 27, 2021

Peter Martin is a political reporter for Bloomberg News, who has written extensively on escalating tensions in the U.S.-China relationship and reported from China's border with North Korea and its far-western region of Xinjiang. Martin studied at Oxford University, Peking University and the London School of Economics, and worked for APCO Worldwide before joining Bloomberg News as a Beijing correspondent in 2017. He is now a defense policy and intelligence reporter for Bloomberg based in Washington, D.C. His new book China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy traces the history of China's foreign policy and its diplomatic service under the Communist Party.

Peter Martin.
Illustration by Lauren Crow

Q: Your book traces the history of modern Chinese diplomacy, particularly since the Communist Party took over. What do you see as the main continuities in China's approach to foreign affairs over the time that you cover?

A: Among China's ministries, the Foreign Ministry is unusual in that it has a really distinctive culture that has lasted from 1949 through today. It's still surrounded by a martial ethos, the idea that Chinese diplomats will act like the People's Liberation Army in civilian clothing. That is the idea that [former Chinese premier] Zhou Enlai had in 1949, where he explained that although the military struggle for the future of China was over, the struggle to improve China's international reputation and to consolidate the hold of the regime wasn't. According to Zhou, Chinese diplomats would have to act with great loyalty to the Party, with unfailing discipline, and they'd need to display what he called a fighting spirit whenever China's interests were challenged. At the same time, they would need to observe a great deal of secrecy, and observe rules like traveling in pairs, sticking closely to talking points and asking permission before they acted. All of these are behaviors that were borne out of the needs of the regime in 1949, and we can still see them today.

What are the key factors that you see as having shaped the new Communist government's approach back in 1949? What did the CCP inherit and how did that shape its foreign policy?

This was a regime that had won its victory after a multi-decade long struggle against the

Nationalists; it faced a United States that was opposed to its government; and it faced a rival government in Taiwan that wanted to invade and replace CCP rule. So right from the outset, [Beijing] was acutely aware of this vulnerability that it faced from outside forces, and it wanted to make sure it maintained a high degree of secrecy and vigilance against the outside world.

BIO AT A GLANCE	
AGE	33
BIRTHPLACE	Grew up in Hungerford, Berkshire, UK
CURRENT POSITION	Defense Policy and Intelligence Reporter, Bloomberg News
PERSONAL LIFE	In a relationship

On the other hand, this was an isolated government with few diplomatic relationships. It needed the legitimacy of the outside world; it needed to trade with the outside world in order to secure its interests. So it had to come up with an approach to diplomacy to square that circle — serving the needs of a closed and paranoid political system on the one hand, but also communicating with the outside world in a way that was, at the same time, more open.

Can you explain how Zhou Enlai set the tone for Chinese diplomacy over the last 70 years, and why he was such a towering figure?

Zhou was the founding father of Chinese diplomacy. From the outset, he set this tone of militaristic discipline in the foreign ministry. He led by example in terms of ruthlessly pursuing China's interests, but also doing so in a way that would be as appealing to outsiders as the strictures of the Chinese system allowed.

The periods when his approach was allowed to shine through, such as the mid 1950s, were some of the most successful periods for Chinese diplomacy. This period involved Chinese diplomats attending the Geneva conference [in 1954, after the Korean War], and the Bandung conference in 1955 [a major gathering of Asian and African states]. At these events the Chinese diplomatic corps maintained its strict discipline but was also able to forge genuine links with the outside world.

Zhou Enlai, founding father of Chinese diplomacy, at the Geneva Conference in 1954 *via Wikipedia*

Of course, Zhou's approach didn't always win out. There were political forces unleashed by Mao in the 1960s which undercut his methods and heralded the beginning of a much more bombastic foreign policy that was far more focused on domestic politics and ideology. We have seen that second approach unleashed on multiple occasions by the CCP, most recently in 2012 under Xi Jinping. But there's always this alternate, softer, charm-offensive style which Zhou initiated.

Zhou put forward "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" to form the bedrock of Chinese foreign policy in the 1950s. Can you explain what these were and the extent to which they remain important?

This is a set of principles which Zhou employed during discussions with India in the mid 1950s and which he restated publicly at the Bandung conference. It was really an effort to come up with talking points that would provide common ground between the new Communist government and developing nations, with the focus on sovereignty and statehood, rather than armed struggle and revolution. It was a set of principles that appealed

to China at the time, given the era of semi-colonialism that it had emerged from; but it also appealed to Nehru's India after its experience with colonial Britain. They also had the potential, Zhou thought, to appeal much more widely across the developing world, which was really ripe for influence at the time, with wave after wave of newly independent nations emerging.

So when Zhou put forward these principles and they gained traction, they gradually became a celebrated part of China's diplomatic approach. They are still regularly referenced by top leaders, including China's foriegn minister, Wang Yi, and even by Xi Jinping himself, particularly when China wants to remind the world, in venues like the UN General Assembly, that it is a country that respects sovereignty; or [when Beijing wants] to draw a contrast with the much more interventionist approach that the U.S. has taken since the end of the Cold War.

The problem now with positing these principles is that they often conflict with core elements of China's contemporary approach to foriegn policy. Think of the approach that Chinese state media has taken to criticizing foreign political systems and its effort to spread what the US and other countries say is disinformation; you think of the role that foreign ministry spokespeople have taken in propagating the idea that the U.S. Army initiated the coronavirus, and a whole host of different tactics which seem to sit uneasily with the idea that China respects sovereignty and the rights of other nations to manage their own affairs. So the five principles continue to have a privileged place in the rhetoric of Chinese diplomacy, but I think outsiders often see a clash with China's actions.

Over the years, China's leaders have often insisted that they don't seek to impose their system of government on others. On the other hand, outside China there's a debate about whether China could become an expansionary, aggressive country. What's your conclusion?

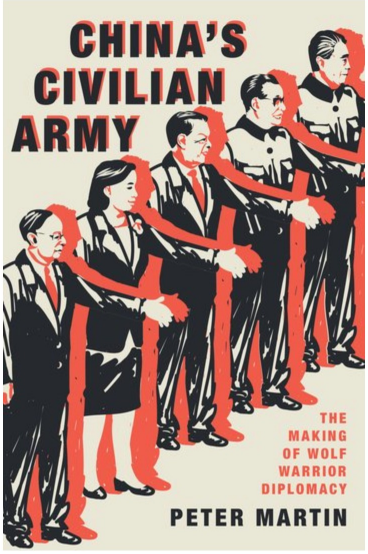
This is something that's not settled, even within the Chinese political system. There's not a single definitive answer. Some members of China's foreign policy establishment would prefer to see China continue to take a low-key approach to foreign affairs; and equally there are members of the establishment and the leadership of the CCP that believe that China is now powerful and influential enough that it doesn't need to be lectured to by the outside, and that it deserves a degree of respect associated with being a great power. It's an approach that says, "Here is our political system. Here we stand. We can be no other and you will meet us on our own terms. And if we believe that the interests of our government are best served by changing or challenging the political systems of others, then so be it. If there's a diplomatic cost to that, we can absorb it." People on the conservative side of that debate have been winning out in recent years, but I don't think it's a debate that is finished.

Another theme that runs through your book is the tension Chinese diplomats face having to be disciplined representatives of the country's government, all while operating in the sometimes rarefied world of global diplomacy. It seems that foreign service diplomats have often been among the first in the firing line when there is a hard line movement in domestic Chinese politics, such as in the 1960s or currently. How have Chinese diplomats tended to act during periods of political turbulence back home, and to what extent do you think they are conflicted these days?

Those periods tend to be ones where Chinese diplomacy has clashed most with the outside world. During those times Chinese diplomats are more likely to be focused on how they can stay safe and stay on the right side of China's political system, than they are on whether their actions are helping to improve the image of China. So often they will make grandiose statements of support for the top political leadership in Beijing, whether that's Mao Zedong or Xi Jinping, and they will instinctively rebut any criticism of China, even if they know those criticisms are valid, because they want to avoid looking weak at home. We have seen things swing back towards that kind of behaviour since 2012, especially during the

pandemic.

The emergence of so-called "Wolf Warrior" Chinese diplomats, who aggressively put forward the country's point of view, often on social media, has been a feature of the last couple of years. You write that in a sense China has had Wolf Warriors for as long as it has had diplomats, at least under the CCP. Could you expand on that idea — how new the Wolf Warriors really are?



China's Civilian Army by Peter Martin. *Source: Oxford University Press*

I see Wolf Warrior tactics as one tool in a range of options that the PRC has deployed right from the outset in its diplomacy. At times when the political system has been domestically focused, and worried about threats posed to its legitimacy from the outside, these tactics have tended to come to the fore.

They are often practiced by the same individuals. For example, Yang Jiechi [who led the recent talks between China and U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in Alaska] can practice Wolf Warrior tactics as well as anyone else; but when he needs to be he can be charming; he can quote from the obituaries section of *The New York Times*, speak in perfect English and riff on jokes with people. So often these Wolf Warrior tactics have coexisted with softer, charm-focused tactics, even by the same individuals. And over time, there has been a cycling back and forth as to which of those tendencies is more dominant in Chinese foreign policy.

Since 2012, and especially in the last 18 months, that assertive tendency has shone through. In some sense, what's happening at the moment mirrors what happened in the early 1950s or 1960s. But there's some stuff that's new. China has a much more confident image of its own political system than it's had, arguably, at any time since the late 1980s. Chinese leaders talk about changes unseen in a century. They believe that the international system is changing under their feet and that China will be a main beneficiary of those changes, and that the U.S. will be a loser. And so there's a new sense of confidence that exists, which perhaps hasn't been there in those previous periods.

Even so, this new confidence sits together with many of the same enduring insecurities the regime has always had and that individual diplomats have too. These insecurities have motivated Xi Jinping to launch a sweeping anti-corruption campaign that has punished more than 1.5 million individuals, to abolish term limits on the presidency and focus on domestic ideology at home while experimenting with re-education camps in Xinjiang and overseeing a sweeping crackdown in Hong Kong. So there is this new confidence and also these enduring insecurities. The upshot has been a reassertion of the very long standing tactics in Chinese diplomacy tailored to the world of the early 21st century.

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Do you think this combination of confidence and lingering insecurity has led China to overplay its hand in the last 12 months? We've seen them taking on several countries at once, whether it's India, the U.S., Australia or its neighbors around the South China Sea.

A lot of people in China's foreign policy establishment believe China has overplayed its hand, and when you look at the sweep of PRC diplomacy, there is this pattern: periods of overreach and then periods of recalibration. What's striking about the last decade of Chinese diplomacy is that the recalibration seems to be taking so long. I've been struck that since the Biden administration came in it has started working more closely with allies to invigorate organizations like the Quad, and to use the G7 as a way to show unity against China. And yet still, these very assertive Chinese tactics have continued with countries like India and Australia, where China has used coercive economic tactics in order to punish the country. It has imposed sanctions on European lawmakers even at the risk of undermining a hard-won deal on investment with the EU. It's striking that despite all of this blowback, there hasn't been a recalibration.

Xi Jinping did talk in a recent speech about the need for a more "loveable" international image for China. So maybe that's the start of some kind of readjustment of China's external posture. The difficult thing, though, is that Xi seems to be focused on the messaging of Chinese diplomacy — i.e., "Are we selling our policies in the right way?" But the scale of the backlash against China really suggests that only a shift in policies will be sufficient [to improve its external relations]. And that sets China's international reputation on a collision course with the direction of its politics. Every indication from speeches that Xi gives suggests he intends to continue to consolidate the Party's hold over the economy, and over civil society. He has called China's policies in Xinjiang "absolutely correct." He has talked regularly about the central place that China is going to take in world affairs by 2050; [he has talked about] the size of its military and the fact that it will never give up an inch of territory. So in some ways it's hard to see how just tweaking the messaging will be sufficient. It would have to be a broader recalibration of policy and there aren't many signs that that is on the way.

Do you think that is, in part, because notwithstanding the blowback it's had from several countries, one hard lesson Beijing may have taken from the last twelve months is that it can get away with things? It's carried on being aggressive in the South China Sea, in Hong Kong, it's carried on saber-rattling about Taiwan. Do you think this is all borne of a belief that the US and its allies are neither strong enough nor committed enough to stand in China's way ultimately?

A couple of things. Some of what Beijing would see as the gains from these policies, you could argue that from their point of view they outweigh the reputational cost. The so-called terrorist attacks emanating from Xinjiang and the risk of them spreading across China was a threat to CCP legitimacy and that threat, at least for now, seems to have been subdued, even if it's been done using tactics that are incredibly controversial across the world. Having Hong Kong erupt in protest on a regular basis was an embarrassment to Beijing, and that has now [been] halted, even though it has come at the cost of significant criticism. Militarizing artificial islands in the South China Sea is something that allows China to project its power out into the Pacific. It also costs China reputational points, but maybe if you're a PLA strategist or if you sit on the Politburo Standing Committee, maybe that's worth the cost. So on the one hand, there are real gains to some of these policies from the CCP's perspective that outweigh the costs.

That's also paired with a belief that the West might protest but it doesn't really have the guts to follow through with any action that would substantively hurt China. That belief is rooted in an analysis of Western political systems and in particular the U.S. system that has concluded that these guys were not able to act decisively in the face of the 2008 financial crisis; that they drew red lines on Syria that they didn't follow through with; that they watched Putin's Russia march into Crimea and were not able to stop it — and most recently, that they faced massive threats to the health and well being of their populations in the form of the coronavirus and they weren't able to halt that either. So why would they be able to halt our ambitions when we have the full might of the party state and the world's second-largest economy behind us? I think that calculation is also there.

Conversely, in a parallel world, there was an opportunity for China to take a more emollient line over the last year or so; to say, "Yes, this virus came from China, we are now going to take every step to cooperate with the world to stop it and to prevent its spread." Of course nothing like that really happened. Was something like that ever possible? Is there anything in the Chinese system that would allow for a softer approach?

In the past, if you look at China's response to the Tiananmen [Square] massacre in 1989, the first few months saw a doubling down on the government's propaganda line about foreign influence causing the protests and them being the result of a small minority of anti-government forces at home. Chinese diplomats kind of retreated into their shell and became very, very defensive. Not long after that, there was a sense that China was on a trajectory in terms of its economic opening, and also in terms of the changes that Deng Xiapong was making incrementally to the political system, such as institutionalizing changes to the leadership system; that it was on a road that required an international environment that would accommodate its rise. So there was a sense that China could set aside territorial disputes, it might even be able to look past criticism of its policies in the wake of Tiananmen, so long as it was able to secure those interests, which were quite narrowly defined and basically amounted to regime survival and economic growth. And so the CCP did display a large degree of dexterity then, in terms of being able to recalibrate its foreign policy.

We haven't seen that recently. The analysis of how far China needs to recalibrate and whether it needs to seem to be quite different. There seems to be a belief that we are strong enough now to withstand this and reshape the international system to our will.

How much of a constraining factor is economics on Chinese foreign policy? China became a net importer of oil in 1993, it is a net importer of many commodities that it needs for infrastructure and so on; it also has hundreds of billions of dollars in foreign capital invested in the country. How much of a constraint is that on how assertive China can be, whether around Taiwan or more generally?

Until recently, the CCP seems to have seen its new found economic strength as a source of leverage over others. The fact that there's an array of American companies invested in China has been seen as something China can use as a lever in the relationship in order to hold back political elites in Washington. The fact that European countries were recovering slowly from the global financial crisis was seen as an opportunity to use China's rapid economic growth to shape the preferences of European countries and make them more friendly to China's interests.

That approach has had some success, but what's striking recently is that belief in the power of the Chinese economy to reshape others' interests has resulted in a fear of too much Chinese influence across all major economies. Countries are starting to look at Chinese investment through a national security lens; companies watching a political backlash against China in Washington are reluctant to speak out in favor of closer ties. And there is also this sense that China can't pick off or isolate countries which stick up to it any more — that Europe on the whole is willing to speak with one voice against China.

In the absence of a fundamental rethink, not just of diplomacy but of politics, Chinese diplomats are always going to be closely wedded to talking points, and concerned about how their superiors evaluate their loyalty to the government; they will likely need to meet with foreigners in pairs and they will lack an ability to ad lib and improvise on the spot.

I do wonder if that view in Beijing will start to shift. When you think of something like the investment agreement that China negotiated with the EU — that took 7 years to negotiate. It was a major diplomatic victory in the sense that it prevented the U.S. from showing a united front against China. And it has paved the way, potentially, for a free trade agreement with Europe. These are very significant, substantive outcomes for China. Yet it seems to have been undermined in one fell swoop with Chinese sanctions against European lawmakers. And so now that Chinese behavior is starting to have economic costs that might well be felt in Beijing, I wonder if its approach will start to change. But if there is a rethink, we're at the very beginning of it.

You make the point that although China has produced diplomats with great ability, one skill they have generally failed to develop, that is pretty key for diplomacy, is the art of persuasion. What do you put that down to, and do you worry about the implications for future disputes that we might see?

China's political system sets an upper limit on the effectiveness of Chinese diplomats. In the absence of a fundamental rethink, not just of diplomacy but of politics, Chinese diplomats are always going to be closely wedded to talking points, and concerned about how their superiors evaluate their loyalty to the government; they will likely need to meet with foreigners in pairs and they will lack an ability to ad lib and improvise on the spot. As long as those political strictures remain in place it's quite difficult to see Chinese diplomats breaking that upper limit on their effectiveness.

Despite their professionalism, Chinese diplomats also often seem to fail to "read the room" in the countries they are in. The most recent obvious example of this — and they weren't alone, of course — was in the failure to see the rise of Trump in the U.S. and then the failure to understand how aggressive he might be towards China. What do you think accounts for that?

Intelligence analysts use this phrase of "mirror imaging," to refer to how we often take assumptions from our own political systems and apply them to others. Chinese diplomats are guilty of doing that, just as we are sometimes guilty of doing that to China. The biggest shortcoming in China's analysis of Trump and of populism more generally was this belief that if we can go right to the top and talk to the right guy, whether it's Trump or Jared Kushner or Boris Johnson in the UK or whoever, then we can change the way that the rest of the system works from the top down.

But what's very clear about the rise of populism and the backlash against China is that lots of this is driven from the bottom up, whether it's from the electorate or grass roots activism or local mayors or state politicians. This is not something that China can change with a phone call or a meeting with a

MISCELLANEA

BOOK REC	*I'm trying to get up to speed on my new beat and recently marveled at "Making the Corps" by* Thomas E. Ricks. He zooms in and out of small personal moments and big themes so effortlessly.
FAVORITE MUSIC	I've spent a lot of the last year listening to Vulfpeck

couple of key Republican elites or
the former president's son-in-law. And there's been a deep seated failure to appreciate that.

If you talk to Chinese diplomats now about how they feel about the Biden administration's policies, they will say "We're really surprised the new administration didn't come in and take a softer line. They seem to be just repeating what Trump did." There seems to be a genuine shock about that. But anyone who lives in Washington or a European capital and understands the underlying politics at play will know that it's not one or two people who are steering this ship, it's a systemic change in popular and elite opinion across the West. Part of this stems from an assumption on the part of Chinese elites that these political systems work in just the same way as ours does — and that's just not true.

Andrew Peaple is a UK-based editor at *The Wire*. Previously, Andrew was a reporter and editor at *The Wall Street Journal*, including stints in Beijing from 2007 to 2010 and in Hong Kong from 2015 to 2019. Among other roles, Andrew was Asia editor for the Heard on the Street column, and the Asia markets editor.

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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BY GARRETT O'BRIEN

A look at Transsion's monumental growth, unique marketing strategies and future growth potential.

Q & A

Jörg Wuttke on China's Self-Destruction

BY ANDREW PEAPLE

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