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Tracing China's diplomatic transition to wolf warrior diplomacy and its implications

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This study investigates the evolution of China's diplomacy, specifically its transition from a peaceful and low-profile approach to the assertive and confrontational wolf warrior style, and its implications for international relations, regional politics, and global governance. With China's growing influence on the global stage, understanding the dynamics of its diplomatic strategy is crucial for navigating the complexities of contemporary international relations. The paper examines the underlying motivations for adopting the wolf warrior approach, using three case studies during the COVID-19 pandemic: the Twitter spat between Zhao Lijian and the U.S. State Department, the diplomatic conflict between China and Australia, and the confrontation between China and Sweden. These incidents provide valuable insights into the various dimensions of China's wolf warrior diplomacy, including its assertive rhetoric, challenge to traditional diplomatic norms, and the leveraging of economic power for political ends.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, China has undergone a significant transformation in its approach to international diplomacy, with the emergence of a more assertive and confrontational style known as “wolf warrior” diplomacy. This shift in diplomatic strategy is named after the popular Chinese action film series “Wolf Warrior,” where Chinese special forces battle foreign adversaries. The adoption of wolf warrior diplomacy has sparked a growing debate among scholars and policymakers about its underlying motivations and its impact on China’s international image and soft power. As China continues to play an increasingly prominent role in global affairs, understanding the driving forces behind its diplomatic conduct and the consequence of this assertive posture is of utmost importance for navigating the complexities of international relations in the 21st century.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to elucidate the key factors driving China’s adoption of wolf warrior diplomacy and the impact of this strategy on China’s ability to influence international perceptions and forge productive relationships with other countries. Given the ongoing strategic competition between China and the United States, as well as China’s growing influence in regions such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and Europe, understanding the dynamics of China’s wolf warrior diplomacy is essential for policymakers and scholars seeking to engage with and respond to China’s evolving role in global affairs.

This study aims to analyze the evolution of China’s wolf warrior diplomacy through three incidents of its application during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the implications for China’s status on the global stage. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a critical context for investigating the underlying motivations and ramifications of this aggressive diplomatic approach, as it has resulted in a global crisis that has placed China at the epicenter of international scrutiny and debate. This study will begin by tracing the evolution of China’s diplomatic approach, highlighting the differences between the traditional low-profile diplomacy, characterized by Deng Xiaoping’s “hide your strength, bide your time” dictum, and the current wolf warrior diplomacy (Godbole, 2015). Examples of China’s earlier diplomatic approach include the “peaceful rise” narrative and the emphasis on non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. In contrast, wolf warrior diplomacy is marked by aggressive rhetoric, public confrontations, and a willingness to push back against perceived slights and criticism.

Using a qualitative case study approach, this study aims to offer a deeper exploration of the multifaceted factors underpinning China’s diplomatic transition. Drawing from an array of primary and secondary sources, including official statements and media analyses, the aim was to understand the “wolf warrior” phenomenon in its various manifestations and its implications. Through a meticulous examination of these instances, patterns, tendencies, and underlying motivations were derived, ultimately crafting a comprehensive picture of the shift in China’s diplomatic strategy. This research will examine specific instances of wolf warrior diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Twitter spat between Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian and the U.S. State Department; each of this case serves as a concrete representation of the theoretical constructs posited. This article seeks not merely to contribute to the scholarly discourse surrounding China’s diplomatic transition, but to proffer an incisive expert analysis on the subject. While many discussions in the literature offer foundational understanding, this evaluation presented herein captures the dynamics and underpinnings of the ‘wolf warrior’ phenomenon.

The shift in China’s diplomatic approach from a peaceful stance to the more assertive ‘wolf warrior’ style is intrinsically tied

to the Power Transition Theory. As China gains ascendancy in global affairs, it strategically adapts its diplomacy in response to both internal dynamics such as rising nationalism and the perception of external threats, as well as a broader aim to reshape the prevailing international order. This transition, marked by various incidents and encompassing multiple dimensions, underscores the nation’s effort to align its international posture with its perceived status and ambitions.

By analyzing the motivations and consequences of China’s wolf warrior diplomacy, this study will offer insights into the changing landscape of international diplomacy and the implications of this transformation for global power dynamics. As the world grapples with the myriad challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the factors shaping China’s diplomatic conduct is crucial for fostering cooperation and managing tensions in an increasingly interconnected and multipolar global order.

Power transition theory and the rise of “wolf warrior” diplomacy. Power Transition Theory, originally formulated by A.F.K. Organski in his book “World Politics” (1958), posits that international conflicts are most likely to occur when a rising power is poised to surpass a currently dominant power. This transition period is characterized by potential instability as the dominant power seeks to maintain its position, while the rising power challenges the status quo. The theory’s primary focus is on the relative power of states, especially the most powerful or “major” states, in the international system.

China’s ascent as a global power over the past few decades positions it as the quintessential rising power in the context of Power Transition Theory. As China’s economic, military, and technological prowess grew, so did its ambitions and aspirations on the international stage. This rising power status, coupled with the perception of an encircling or constraining U.S.-led order, provides a plausible backdrop against which the assertive ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy can be understood.

China’s ‘wolf warrior’ diplomats often challenge narratives, rebuff criticisms, and assert China’s perspective vociferously. This assertiveness can be perceived as a reflection of China’s growing confidence in its risen status and its aspiration to reshape certain aspects of the international order more in line with its interests. Such diplomatic behavior can be interpreted as a challenge to the prevailing status quo, reminiscent of the dynamics highlighted by Power Transition Theory.

Moreover, the ‘wolf warrior’ approach, in challenging the prevailing international norms, can be seen as an indicator of China’s discontent with the existing order, further suggesting that the country is in the phase of challenging the dominant power’s position, as postulated by Organski.

Transition to wolf-warrior diplomacy

The evolution of China’s diplomacy from a more peaceful and low-profile approach to the assertive wolf warrior style is a significant development in the realm of international relations, echoing the Power Transition Theory. To understand this transformation, it is crucial to analyze the historical context, the changes in China’s domestic and international environment, and the strategic objectives that have shaped its diplomatic conduct over time.

In the early years of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Chinese diplomacy was largely shaped by the ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Chuang, 1996). With its non-alignment policy and the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” China sought to maintain its independence and avoid entanglements in the superpower rivalry

(Richardson, 2009). Following the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in the late 1970s marked the beginning of a new era in Chinese diplomacy. Deng's dictum of "hide your strength, bide your time" guided China's diplomatic strategy, prioritizing economic development and maintaining a low profile in global affairs. Deng is credited with developing this strategic guideline as part of China's approach to foreign policy, emphasizing a low-profile and cautious approach to international relations while focusing on domestic development (Godbole, 2015). The phrase essentially captures the idea of concealing one's capabilities and intentions while waiting for the opportune moment to act.

Peaceful diplomacy era. During the 1990s and early 2000s, China's diplomacy was characterized by an emphasis on peaceful development, cooperation, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries (Medeiros and Fravel, 2003). This approach was manifested in the "peaceful rise" narrative, which sought to reassure the international community that China's growing economic and military capabilities would not pose a threat to global stability. This section will provide further insight into China's peaceful and low-profile diplomacy by exploring its key principles, objectives, and examples of its implementation.

Three key principles are identified that guided the peaceful narrative of China's foreign diplomacy. One of the cornerstones of China's peaceful diplomacy was the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This principle, which was also part of the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," enabled China to forge partnerships with countries across the political spectrum and maintain its policy independence. The second one is the mutual respect and benefit. China's low-profile diplomacy emphasized the importance of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other nations, as well as seeking mutually beneficial cooperation in various fields, such as trade, investment, and development assistance. The last one is the peaceful development. China's diplomatic approach was centered on the idea that its economic growth and modernization would not pose a threat to global peace and stability. This notion was encapsulated in the "peaceful rise" narrative, which aimed to reassure the international community of China's benign intentions (Danner, 2018).

The primary objectives of China's peaceful and low-profile diplomacy included ensuring a stable external environment. China's focus on economic development and modernization required a peaceful international environment (Richardson, 2009). By adopting a low-profile diplomatic approach, China sought to minimize tensions and avoid becoming embroiled in geopolitical rivalries that could hinder its growth (Yuan, 2019). Secondly, China's rapid economic expansion necessitated access to global markets and resources. Peaceful diplomacy enabled China to forge trade partnerships, secure investment opportunities, and participate in international institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). The last goal for China was to cultivate a positive international image. By emphasizing cooperation, non-interference, and peaceful development, China aimed to project a positive image on the global stage and allay concerns about its growing power.

Some examples of China's peaceful and low-profile diplomacy include China's accession to the WTO. In 2001, China became a member of the WTO, signaling its commitment to integrating into the global economic system and abiding by international trade rules. This event exemplifies China's peaceful diplomacy, as it sought to cooperate with other nations and contribute to the global economy. Another case is China's good-neighbor policy. China pursued a "good-neighbor policy" in its relations with

neighboring countries in Asia, emphasizing peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and economic cooperation (Tsai and Hung, 2011). Examples include the establishment of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area and the promotion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a regional security mechanism. China's role in multilateral diplomacy: China's peaceful diplomacy was also reflected in its active participation in multilateral institutions and initiatives, such as the United Nations, the G20, and the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program. By engaging in multilateral diplomacy, China sought to demonstrate its commitment to global governance and addressing shared challenges.

Overall, China's peaceful and low-profile diplomacy was characterized by an emphasis on non-interference, mutual respect, and peaceful development. Although, this characterization is not without its critics. Some offer a more complex portrait, suggesting that while these principles were publicly espoused, China's foreign policy moves might not have always aligned neatly with them (Dikötter, 2022). Similarly, Vogel (2011) illuminates the pragmatic and sometimes assertive approaches Deng took on the global stage.

This approach facilitated China's integration into the global economy, helped maintain a stable external environment for a stable external environment for its economic growth, and contributed to cultivating a positive international image. As China continued its peaceful rise, it successfully established partnerships with countries across the globe, gained access to markets and resources, and participated actively in multilateral diplomacy. This diplomatic strategy played a critical role in China's emergence as a global power during the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

However, it is essential to note that the peaceful and low-profile approach has been gradually replaced by a more assertive and confrontational diplomatic know as the wolf warrior diplomacy in recent years, which also brought us the research puzzle, why did China give up its peaceful approach and adopt the more conflictual one? The shift can be attributed to various factors, including changes in China's leadership, rising nationalism, and the perception of an increasingly hostile international environment. Despite the evolution in China's diplomatic approach, understanding the principles and objectives of its peaceful and low-profile diplomacy remains crucial for comprehending China's foreign policy trajectory and its impact on global politics.

Reasons of the transition

The transition from China's peaceful diplomacy to the more assertive wolf warrior style has been a gradual process, taking place over the past decade. Several factors have contributed to this shift, including changes in leadership, rising nationalism, and perceived external threats. This section will explore the timeline, reasons, and the process of this transition in greater detail.

Change in leadership. While it is difficult to pinpoint an exact date or event marking the beginning of the transition, the process gained momentum after Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012. Under Xi's tenure, China's foreign policy became increasingly assertive and nationalistic, reflecting his vision of the "China Dream" and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Ferdinand, 2016). Xi Jinping's ascendancy to the top leadership position in China has brought about a significant departure from the previous administrations of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Xi's assertive leadership style and ambitions for China have played a crucial role in shaping the country's foreign policy direction. Under Xi's tenure, the CCP has emphasized the importance of a strong and unified nation (Chang-Liao, 2016). This has been reflected in the

consolidation of power within the party, the crackdown on corruption, and the strengthening of ideological control. These domestic measures have had a direct impact on China's foreign policy, as a more confident and assertive China seeks to reclaim its historical place in the international system. Xi Jinping's leadership has led to a more proactive and assertive Chinese foreign policy (Yan, 2014; Wang, 2011). This shift is exemplified in initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which showcase China's intent to shape regional and global economic structures.

Nationalism. Nationalism has been a potent force in Chinese politics for decades, but it has become increasingly prominent in recent years due to a combination of factors. Rapid economic development and China's emergence as a global power have fostered a strong sense of national pride among its citizens (Wang, 2012). This sentiment has been further reinforced by the Chinese government's extensive propaganda efforts, which emphasize historical grievances and the need for national rejuvenation. Rising nationalism has put pressure on Chinese leaders to adopt a more assertive stance in defending the country's interests and projecting its power on the international stage (Weiss, 2013). Citizens expect their government to be strong and unyielding in the face of external challenges. Wolf warrior diplomacy, with its combative approach and aggressive rhetoric, caters to these expectations by showcasing China's strength and determination on the international stage. This is evident in incidents such as the 2012 anti-Japanese protests over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, which saw large-scale public demonstrations in China and heightened tensions between the two countries. A key component of China's nationalism is the narrative of national rejuvenation and the "China Dream" of returning to great power status (Shi and Liu, 2020). Wolf warrior diplomacy serves to project an image of a confident and powerful China that is unafraid to assert its interests and challenge the existing global order. This aligns with the national narrative of a strong, resurgent China that is reclaiming its rightful place in the world.

Perception of an increasingly hostile international environment. China's perception of an increasingly hostile international environment has also contributed to the adoption of a more confrontational diplomatic approach (Friedberg, 2014). The strategic competition with the United States and its allies has raised concerns in China about potential encirclement and containment. China's assertiveness in territorial disputes, such as the South China Sea and East China Sea, can be attributed to its perception of a hostile international environment and the need to defend its core interests (Ross, 2012). For instance, China's island-building activities in the South China Sea and the establishment of Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ) in the East China Sea are seen as direct responses to perceived external threats (Rinehart and Elias, 2015). China perceives itself as being unfairly targeted by the Western powers, which has fueled its desire to adopt a more aggressive diplomatic stance to defend its interests and counterbalance the perceived threats. China has also faced mounting criticisms over various issues, such as its human rights record, its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its policies in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. These criticisms, which China views as attempts to undermine its legitimacy and international standing, have led to a more confrontational approach from Chinese diplomats. Wolf warrior diplomacy enables China to push back against these accusations and assert its own narrative.

The transition from China's peaceful diplomacy to the assertive wolf warrior style can be attributed to the interplay of factors such as leadership change under Xi Jinping, rising nationalism, and the perception of external threats. These factors have led to a more proactive and confrontational Chinese foreign policy, which has significant implications for international relations and global politics. By understanding the underlying motivations behind this shift, we can now better navigate the complexities of China's evolving diplomatic conduct.

The leadership transition in China can be conceptualized as a dynamic response to its perceived international environment. As the nation detects a more hostile global landscape, it not only influences the nature and strategy of its leadership but also reinforces the already rising currents of nationalism within its borders. This heightened nationalism, in turn, further molds leadership decisions and the diplomatic tactics adopted. Nationalism, fueled by perceived external threats, acts as a driving force for leaders to adopt more assertive stances in the international arena, symbolizing both a defensive posture against perceived antagonism and a bid to rally internal support. Simultaneously, leadership change, embodying these assertive tendencies, amplifies the sense of external threats, creating a feedback loop. Therefore, pinpointing a single decisive variable behind the emergence of China's "wolf warrior" diplomacy is challenging. The cyclical relationship between leadership shifts, burgeoning nationalism, and the perception of an antagonistic international environment illustrates a deeply intertwined triad, where each factor continually influences and is influenced by the others. Within the Power Transition framework, all variables collectively signify China's trajectory in the global power hierarchy. Each element plays a symbiotic role, reinforcing the others, making it difficult to untangle their individual impacts. In this context, it's arguably accurate to consider all these variables as equally crucial in shaping China's assertive diplomatic posture.

The transition in China's diplomatic approach from peaceful to the more assertive 'wolf warrior' style is emblematic of the dynamics elucidated by Power Transition Theory. As China's global influence and power grew, it began to challenge the prevailing international norms and the dominant power's position in the global hierarchy. This shift in diplomatic demeanor can be interpreted as a manifestation of China's growing confidence and its intent to recalibrate aspects of the international order that it perceives as incongruent with its risen status. Such behavior aligns with Power Transition Theory's premise, which posits that as a rising power inches closer to the dominant power in capabilities, it becomes more likely to challenge the existing order.

Dimensions of the transitions

How and in what dimensions did the transition from a peaceful diplomacy to the assertive wolf warrior style? In what ways are China's diplomacy different from before? Understanding the dimensions of the transition from a peaceful diplomacy to the assertive wolf warrior style and the ways in which China's diplomacy has changed is essential for various reasons. As China emerges as a major global power, its diplomatic behavior influences the international order, regional politics, crisis management, and conflict resolution. Recognizing the dimensions and extent of the transition helps stakeholders assess China's role in global affairs, devise tailored foreign policy responses, and navigate regional complexities. Additionally, this knowledge is crucial for analyzing the potential impact on international institutions and norms, as China's assertiveness may reshape the global governance system to reflect its interests and values. Finally, understanding the connection between China's diplomatic shift

and domestic politics and nationalism is vital for comprehending the interplay between domestic and international factors shaping China's foreign policy and its implications for global affairs. This research categorizes the shift into three different dimensions.

Diplomatic rhetoric and communication. The first dimension of transition is diplomatic rhetoric and communication. The evolution of China's diplomatic rhetoric and communication underlies the shift towards wolf warrior diplomacy. Chinese diplomats have increasingly employed aggressive and nationalistic rhetoric in their public statements and interactions with foreign counterparts. This change is evident in the assertive speeches of high-ranking diplomats, such as Foreign Minister Wang Yi and former spokesperson Hua Chunying, who have used confrontational language to defend China's interests and challenge criticisms (Dai and Luqiu, 2022). These diplomats have employed strong language and combative rhetoric to challenge criticisms of China, often resorting to tit-for-tat exchanges and personal attacks. This approach has been particularly pronounced on social media platforms like Twitter, where Chinese diplomats have become more active in recent years. China's diplomatic language has become more assertive, reflecting the country's growing confidence and desire to reshape the international order (Economy, 2018). This change in diplomatic rhetoric reflects China's growing confidence as a global power, as well as the perception that the international environment has become more hostile towards its rise. Consequently, Chinese diplomats feel the need to be more assertive in defending China's interests and challenging the narratives put forth by other countries, especially the United States and its allies.

The rise of social media has played a significant role in shaping China's diplomatic rhetoric and communication. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have enabled Chinese diplomats to reach a global audience, disseminate the Chinese government's narrative, and engage in direct confrontations with foreign diplomats, journalists, and academics (Huang, 2022). This shift towards assertive communication on social media has been seen as a double-edged sword. While it allows China to challenge the dominant narratives put forth by Western countries and present its own perspective, it also exposes Chinese diplomats to criticism and risks damaging the country's image.

The adoption of wolf warrior diplomacy and the resulting change in diplomatic rhetoric and communication have had mixed implications for China's international image. While the assertive posture has resonated with certain segments of the global audience, particularly in developing countries that appreciate China's defiance of Western hegemony, it has also generated concerns and criticism. Many countries perceive the aggressive rhetoric of Chinese diplomats as a reflection of China's growing assertiveness and ambition, raising concerns about the potential for conflict and tension in international relations. As a result, China's wolf warrior diplomacy has been met with skepticism and pushback from various quarters, which could hinder its efforts to project soft power and reshape the international order. The diplomatic rhetoric and communication aspect of China's transition towards wolf warrior diplomacy is characterized by a shift in tone, the assertiveness of high-profile diplomats and spokespersons, and the growing use of social media as a tool for public diplomacy. This change has significant implications for China's international image, as well as the broader dynamics of international relations. The newfound assertiveness can also be viewed as a reflection of China's intent to actively shape international narratives, akin to a rising power aspiring for greater voice in global dialogues.

Territorial disputes and military assertiveness. The shift to wolf warrior diplomacy is also evident in China's approach to territorial disputes and military assertiveness. The country has pursued its territorial claims more aggressively, leading to increased tensions with neighboring countries and the United States. China's militarization of the South China Sea, the establishment of ADIZ in the East China Sea, and its border disputes with India are all examples of the assertive posture in the context of territorial disputes. China's increasing willingness to assert its territorial claims and use military force stems from the perception of an increasingly hostile international environment and the need to defend its core interests (Fravel, 2008).

One of the most prominent examples of China's territorial disputes and military assertiveness is the ongoing conflict in the South China Sea. China claims sovereignty over most of the South China Sea, including the Spratly and Paracel Islands, based on its controversial "nine-dash line" demarcation. These claims are contested by neighboring countries, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. China has engaged in land reclamation and militarization of several disputed islands and features in the South China Sea (Dai and Luqiu, 2022; Chubb, 2020), deploying military assets, building airstrips, constructing artificial islands, and finally coercing other countries to cater China's demand (Zhang, 2019). These actions have escalated tensions with other claimants and raised concerns about freedom of navigation and regional stability. China's assertiveness in the East China Sea has also raised concerns about its territorial ambitions. One of the most contentious issues in the region is the sovereignty dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which are administered by Japan but claimed by China. In 2013, China unilaterally declared an ADIZ over the East China Sea, including the disputed islands, leading to increased tensions with Japan and the United States (Nair, 2022). China has also increased its naval and air patrols in the East China Sea, leading to frequent encounters with Japanese and U.S. forces, which heightens the risk of miscalculation and accidental conflict.

China's territorial disputes and military assertiveness are not limited to maritime boundaries. The long-standing border disputes with India, particularly along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas, have witnessed escalating tensions in recent years. The most notable recent incident was the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, where Chinese and Indian troops engaged in a deadly skirmish, resulting in casualties on both sides. The Chinese foreign ministry responded India with its wolf warrior style followed by its assertive military actions, and the results worsened the relations between these two countries (Mattingly and Sundquist, 2022). The heightened tensions along the China-India border have led to increased military deployments and infrastructure development by both countries, raising the stakes and potential for conflict in the region. The territorial disputes and military assertiveness of China are critical components of its transition towards wolf warrior diplomacy. These actions have increased tensions with neighboring countries and the international community, raising concerns about regional stability and the potential for conflict. These also represent China's move to revise regional dynamics in its favor, highlighting Power Transition Theory's claim of a rising power seeking to modify certain rules of the game.

Economic coercion. China's transition to wolf warrior diplomacy has also manifested in the realm of economic statecraft and coercion. As the world's second-largest economy, China has increasingly leveraged its economic power to influence other countries and advance its foreign policy objectives. China's assertive economic statecraft reflects the country's ambition to

become a global power and its willingness to use economic leverage to achieve strategic objectives (Harrell et al., 2018). This is evident in the use of trade restrictions, investment curbs, and tourism boycotts against countries like South Korea, Australia, and Lithuania over political disagreements.

China has employed trade restrictions as a tool to punish or pressure countries that have taken actions perceived as unfavorable to its interests (Martin (2021)). These restrictions often involve limiting imports, exports, or both, targeting specific industries or products that are crucial to the targeted country's economy. For instance, China imposed trade restrictions on Australian products, such as wine, barley, and coal, following Australia's call for an independent inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic and its criticism of China's actions in the South China Sea and Hong Kong (Wong, 2021). China's massive outbound investments, primarily through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have provided it with significant economic leverage over other countries. China has used this leverage to exert influence or pressure by threatening to withhold or reduce investments. For example, when Norway awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo in 2010, China reduced its investments in Norway and suspended bilateral trade talks (Wong, 2021). Tourism is another economic tool that China has used to exert pressure on countries. Chinese tourists contribute significantly to the economies of many countries, making the threat of a tourism boycott an effective means of coercion. For example, after South Korea agreed to deploy the U.S. THAAD missile defense system, China imposed an unofficial ban on group tours to South Korea, causing a significant decline in tourist arrivals and a negative impact on the South Korean economy. China's lending practices, especially to developing countries, have raised concerns about debt diplomacy (Ismail and Aryodiguno, 2022). Critics argue that China deliberately lends to countries with weak economies and governance, knowing that they may struggle to repay the loans. When these countries default, China can then renegotiate the terms of the debt, potentially gaining strategic assets or influence in the process. Examples of debt diplomacy concerns include the cases of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port and the Doraleh Container Terminal in Djibouti. It is also important to note that China's strategies in employing sanctions have been influenced by a combination of its long-standing rhetoric on sanctions and the constraints it imposes on its own actions. This internal tug-of-war has often led to a mismatch between China's immediate interests and its sanction measures. Consequently, until March 2018, which marked the end of Xi Jinping's first term, China exhibited restraint in the aggressive use of economic measures despite its increasingly assertive global stance (Poh, 2020).

While China's economic statecraft and coercion practices have been effective in some instances, they have also generated concerns and backlash from targeted countries and the international community. Drawing from the framework of complex interdependence, China's burgeoning economic capabilities have fostered heightened levels of interdependence with other nations while simultaneously skewing power asymmetries in its favor (Macikenaite, 2020). These actions have raised questions about China's intentions and commitment to the rules-based international order, leading to increased skepticism and wariness towards China's rise. Moreover, targeted countries have sought to diversify their economic relations and reduce their dependence on China, potentially undermining China's long-term influence. China's increased use of economic statecraft and coercion can be interpreted as an assertion of its economic might and desire to establish new economic norms. As Power Transition Theory postulates, as the gap narrows between the dominant and the rising power, contestations over systemic rules become more pronounced.

In conclusion, the transition from China's peaceful diplomacy to the assertive wolf warrior style has occurred across multiple dimensions, including diplomatic rhetoric and communication, territorial disputes and military assertiveness, economic statecraft and coercion. This complex process has been shaped by various factors, including changes in leadership, rising nationalism, the perception of external threats, and economic coercion.

Wolf warrior in action: China's diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges for countries around the world, putting their crisis management capacities to the test. As the epicenter of the outbreak, China faced considerable international scrutiny and criticism for its initial handling of the virus. The pandemic further accelerated the shift in China's diplomatic approach, with Chinese diplomats adopting a more assertive and confrontational stance to defend the country's handling of the crisis. Their confrontational approach can manifest in traditional ways or through modern platforms like social media, often involving overt criticisms, admonishments, or even threats (Martin (2021)). One prominent example of China's wolf warrior diplomacy during the pandemic was the Twitter spat between Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian and the U.S. State Department in March 2020. The incident offers valuable insights into China's evolving diplomatic strategy, as well as the role of social media in shaping contemporary geopolitics.

Zhao Lijian vs the U.S. state department. On March 12, 2020, Zhao Lijian tweeted a conspiracy theory suggesting that the U.S. Army might have brought the virus to Wuhan during the 2019 Military World Games held in the city. Zhao's tweet referred to a video clip of a speech by Robert Redfield, the director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in which he acknowledged that some influenza cases in the United States might have been misdiagnosed as COVID-19 (See Fig. 1). Zhao's tweet quickly went viral and sparked a heated exchange between Chinese and American diplomats (Fook, 2020). In response to Zhao's tweet, the U.S. State Department summoned the Chinese ambassador to the United States, Cui Tiankai, to express its strong objections to the conspiracy theory. The State Department also emphasized that such disinformation could undermine international cooperation in combating the pandemic. Despite the U.S. objections, Zhao's tweet was not deleted, and other Chinese diplomats and state-run media outlets continued to promote the conspiracy theory. This served to amplify the message and further strain China-U.S. relations.

The implications and analysis of the Twitter spat between Zhao Lijian and the U.S. State Department reveal the complexities of China's wolf warrior diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is significant for understanding the multifaceted dimensions of China's evolving wolf warrior diplomacy amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The incident demonstrated China's willingness to engage in confrontational rhetoric to deflect criticism and challenge the prevailing narrative about the pandemic's origins, marking a departure from its traditional low-profile diplomatic strategy. This confrontation also exemplifies how contentious rhetoric can hinder international collaboration during a crisis. Furthermore, the incident underscored the growing importance of social media in international diplomacy, as Chinese diplomats increasingly turned to platforms like Twitter to engage with foreign audiences, amplifying their messages and reaching a wider audience, but also exposing China to greater scrutiny and criticism. This diplomatic confrontation further strained the already tense relations between China and the United States, as



Fig. 1 Screenshot of Zhao's tweet. This figure captures a tweet from Zhao referencing a video excerpt of CDC Director Robert Redfield's speech. In the speech, Redfield concedes that certain influenza instances in the U.S. could have been incorrectly identified as COVID-19.

the exchange of accusations and conspiracy theories fueled mutual distrust and hampered international cooperation in addressing the global health crisis. Additionally, the incident revealed the role of public diplomacy and nationalism in shaping China's wolf warrior diplomacy, with Chinese diplomats adopting a confrontational approach to appeal to domestic audiences and demonstrate their commitment to defending China's national honor and pride. This corresponds with the dimensions of China's diplomacy shift.

In essence, the significance of the Twitter spat between Zhao Lijian and the U.S. State Department lies in its capacity to illuminate the complexities and implications of China's wolf warrior diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gaining a deeper understanding of these dynamics is vital for researchers, policymakers, and scholars to effectively navigate the challenges of contemporary geopolitics and formulate informed strategies for engaging with an increasingly assertive China.

China vs Australia. The diplomatic spat between China and Australia over the call for an independent inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic serves as another example of China's wolf warrior diplomacy in action. In April 2020, Australia advocated for an independent investigation into the origins and initial handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, a move perceived by China as an attempt to place blame on the Chinese government. Consequently, China's diplomats harshly criticized Australia, accusing it of being a U.S. puppet and engaging in political manipulation. In response to Australia's call for an inquiry, China imposed tariffs on Australian barley, claiming that Australia had been dumping the product in the Chinese market at unfairly low prices. The Chinese government also imposed tariffs on Australian wine and restrictions on beef imports, which were seen as punitive measures and a form of economic coercion (Wong, 2021). Chinese diplomats and state media used aggressive language to criticize Australia's position. For example, China's state-run Global Times referred to Australia as "gum stuck to the bottom of China's shoe," while China's ambassador to Australia,

Cheng Jingye, warned of boycotts of Australian education, tourism, wine and agricultural products (Wilkins, 2020).

This incident resulted in strained bilateral relations between the two countries, as it signified a notable shift from their previously cordial diplomatic engagement to a more confrontational approach, reflecting China's increasingly assertive stance on the global stage. The economic measures imposed by China, including tariffs on Australian barley and wine, as well as restrictions on beef imports, illustrated China's propensity to leverage its economic power as an instrument of political coercion. This tactic accentuated the interconnectedness of economic and diplomatic relations, as well as the potential repercussions of challenging China's position on sensitive issues. The dispute between China and Australia also had broader implications for regional politics in the Asia-Pacific region. Other nations in the area closely monitored the developments, gauging the potential ramifications of China's wolf warrior diplomacy on their own bilateral relationships with Beijing. The incident served as a signal of China's growing assertiveness in the region, prompting countries to reassess their diplomatic strategies and engagement with China. Furthermore, the aggressive response from China raised concerns about the potential erosion of essential principles in global governance, such as transparency and accountability. The discord between China and Australia highlighted the challenges faced by international cooperation in addressing global issues like pandemics, particularly when a major power adopts a confrontational diplomatic approach. Lastly, the belligerent rhetoric employed by Chinese diplomats in this incident can be partly attributed to the influence of nationalism and domestic politics. By adopting a confrontational stance, China's diplomats aimed to showcase their unwavering commitment to defending the nation's interests and appeasing nationalist sentiments within China. This aspect underscores the complex interplay between domestic and international factors that shape a country's foreign policy and diplomatic behavior.

Gui Congyou vs Sweden. The confrontation between China and Sweden, involving China's Ambassador to Sweden, Gui Congyou, serves as another example of China's wolf warrior diplomacy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, tensions between China and Sweden escalated, particularly due to differences in their approaches to handling the virus outbreak. China's Ambassador to Sweden, Gui Congyou, made a series of aggressive statements against the Swedish government and media, criticizing their pandemic response and accusing them of Sinophobia (Langendonk, 2022). Gui Congyou's confrontational rhetoric targeted the Swedish government and media, claiming that they were spreading disinformation about China's handling of the pandemic and promoting anti-Chinese sentiments. In one instance, he compared Sweden's criticism of China to a lightweight boxer picking a fight with a heavyweight. The Swedish media and political establishment pushed back against Gui Congyou's accusations and confrontational approach, asserting their right to free speech and an independent press. This further intensified tensions between the two countries.

The implications and analysis of the confrontation between China and Sweden, marked by China's Ambassador Gui Congyou's aggressive rhetoric, reveal the multifaceted impact of wolf warrior diplomacy. The incident strained bilateral relations, illustrating how assertive diplomacy can exacerbate tensions and hinder diplomatic engagement. Gui Congyou's confrontational approach challenged traditional diplomatic norms, signaling a shift in the international diplomatic landscape. Furthermore, the tensions influenced public opinion in both countries, potentially increasing skepticism about China's intentions in Sweden and

reinforcing nationalist sentiments in China. The clash between China's narrative control efforts and the values of press freedom and independent journalism in Sweden highlighted the challenges faced by the media in maintaining independence amid diplomatic pressure. Lastly, the confrontation had broader implications for EU-China relations, as it underscored the difficulties faced by European countries in managing relationships with China amid diverging values and interests. Overall, the China-Sweden confrontation serves as an insightful case study of the complexities and repercussions of China's wolf warrior diplomacy.

The mask diplomacy. China's mask diplomacy campaign emerged as a key component of its wolf warrior diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. As countries around the world faced a shortage of medical supplies and struggled to contain the virus, China positioned itself as a leading provider of essential resources and expertise (Yuan, 2023). This campaign aimed to showcase China's capability, generosity, and global leadership in a time of crisis, while also enhancing its soft power and international image. The mask diplomacy campaign involved the large-scale export of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks, gloves, and ventilators, to countries in need. Additionally, China offered medical expertise by sending teams of healthcare professionals to assist with the pandemic response in various countries (Verma, 2020). This assistance was often accompanied by assertive diplomatic rhetoric, emphasizing China's role as a responsible global power and highlighting the shortcomings of other nations in managing the crisis. However, the mask diplomacy campaign has received mixed reactions, raising questions about the efficacy and motives behind China's wolf warrior diplomacy. Some countries have praised China for its timely assistance and support, while others have criticized the quality of the medical supplies, as well as the political and strategic motivations behind China's aid. Critics argue that the campaign has been used as a tool to deflect attention from China's early handling of the pandemic and to advance its geopolitical interests.

Problems and challenges of the wolf warrior diplomacy

China's foray into the "wolf warrior" diplomacy, has not only amplified discussions about its intent but also raised pertinent questions regarding its impact on the delicate balance of global relations. Analyzing the challenges and consequences of this approach becomes imperative, particularly in its interactions with other pivotal players on the world stage.

The Sino-Indian relationship has long been marked by a mix of cooperation and competition. With the rise of China's wolf-warrior diplomacy, the bilateral relationship has seen heightened tensions. The Galwan Valley clash in 2020 underlines the risks of escalation inherent in this aggressive approach to diplomacy (Yun, 2020). As nationalism intensifies in both nations, the space for pragmatic diplomacy may reduce, heightening the risk of conflicts. Moreover, India's strategic alignments, as seen in its increasing closeness to the Quad, may further complicate diplomatic interactions (Smith, 2020).

The EU's stance on China has evolved, oscillating between viewing Beijing as a partner and a rival. However, instances of aggressive Chinese diplomacy, as evidenced in its confrontations with individual European states, threaten this balance (Godement and Vasselier, 2017). The wolf-warrior approach can push Europe towards a more unified, potentially adversarial stance. Economic pressures, particularly in the realm of trade and investment, may also alter Europe's strategic calculus concerning China.

China's wolf-warrior diplomacy intensifies existing strategic mistrust with the US. Recent confrontations, both in high-level meetings and on public platforms, underscore this deterioration

(Campbell and Ratner, 2018). There's a risk that this form of diplomacy will solidify negative American perceptions, prompting even harder stances against Beijing. This, in turn, jeopardizes cooperative opportunities on various global challenges.

The global perception of China has been in flux, with rising unfavorable views predating the COVID-19 pandemic (Silver et al., 2022). South Korea saw negativity spike, reaching an 80% unfavorable view, particularly after 2017 due to China's economic retaliation following South Korea's installation of an American missile interceptor. Japan's skepticism has remained consistent for decades, with tensions over the East China Sea causing unfavorable sentiments to peak at 93% in 2013. Australia's concerns grew notably in 2017 due to warnings about China's influence on Australian politics. This shift in global perception is intrinsically linked to the rise of Xi Jinping and China's assertive wolf warrior diplomacy, which has further complicated its international relationships and reputation.

Besides the events already happened, the adoption of wolf-warrior diplomacy carries several risks and challenges for China's future. First, China's global image might be at stake due to its assertive behavior, which could hinder its overarching soft power ambitions. Secondly, wielding economic might as a punitive tool risks backfiring, prompting nations to reduce their economic dependence on China. This could lead to potential economic repercussions for the nation. Furthermore, maintaining an unwavering aggressive diplomatic approach might cause China to face diplomatic isolation, with countries banding together against its perceived belligerence. Lastly, while this form of diplomacy may resonate with domestic audiences, it could limit Beijing's diplomatic flexibility during international disputes, complicating both escalation and resolution pathways.

Conclusion

This research examined the evolution of China's diplomacy, focusing on the transition from a peaceful and low-profile approach to the more assertive and confrontational wolf warrior style. Key factors that contributed to this transition include changes in leadership, rising nationalism, the perception of external threats, and a willingness to engage in economic coercion. The research delved into three case studies during the COVID-19 pandemic that highlighted the various dimensions and consequences of China's wolf warrior diplomacy: the Twitter spat between Zhao Lijian and the U.S. State Department, the diplomatic spat between China and Australia, and the confrontation between China and Sweden. Each of these incidents showcased China's assertive rhetoric, willingness to challenge traditional diplomatic norms, and the leveraging of economic power for political ends. The implications of this diplomatic shift have significant consequences for international relations, regional politics, and global governance. China's wolf warrior diplomacy has strained bilateral relationships, influenced public opinion, and challenged the principles of press freedom and media independence. Moreover, the assertive stance of China's diplomats has prompted countries to reassess their diplomatic strategies and engagement with China, raising concerns about the potential erosion of essential principles in global governance, such as transparency, accountability, and multilateralism. Furthermore, the confrontational rhetoric and actions have influenced public opinion, potentially undermining China's soft power and complicating its efforts to project a positive global image. As China's wolf warrior diplomacy challenges traditional diplomatic norms and practices, other nations may need to adapt their approaches, leverage various communication channels, and employ persuasive and coercive tactics to protect national interests.

Ultimately, as China continues to assert its position on the global stage, the consequences of its diplomatic approach will

have far-reaching implications for the dynamics of international politics, the stability of regional power structures, and the functioning of global governance systems. Fully understanding China's wolf warrior diplomacy is essential. Policymakers, scholars, and diplomats need this insight to effectively respond to the changing global landscape.

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Ethical approval

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