



“WOLF WARRIOR” DIPLOMACY: A NEW POLICY TO LEGITIMIZE THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY

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ABSTRACT

For several years, and especially since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, some Chinese diplomats, commonly called “wolf warriors” by Western media, have adopted a warlike tone in the media and on social networks. While this new practice, heavily criticized by Western and Asian public opinion, reinforces the perception of China as a threat, this paper questions the motives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in perpetuating such a policy. The paradox is that the real target of China's foreign policy are the Chinese themselves, at home or abroad. In line with previous Chinese leaders, the main purpose of this domestically oriented foreign policy is to legitimize the CCP in the eyes of its own citizens. Thus, “wolf warrior” diplomacy does not affect the objectives of Chinese foreign policy. Three elements support this hypothesis: the visibility of the “wolf warriors” in China, the subtle references to the “century of humiliation” and finally the instrumentalization of the cultural divide to alienate democratic regimes.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2016, and even more so since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, a portion of China's diplomatic corps has adopted an aggressive tone toward its foreign interlocutors. This practice, referred to as "wolf warrior¹ diplomacy", takes its name from *Wolf Warriors I* and *II*,² two Chinese blockbusters featuring members of the Chinese special forces. "Wolf warrior" diplomacy can be described as media attacks by Chinese officials in order to defend the national interest.³ This activity is carried out by China's central government (for example, through the social media accounts of Foreign Ministry spokespersons Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying, who respectively have 860,000 and 730,000 Twitter followers) and by diplomatic staff posted abroad. The "wolf warriors" express themselves via personal accounts – such as that of the former Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom Liu Xiaoming – but also official accounts – such as that of the Chinese embassy in the United States or the Chinese embassy in France. In addition to their social media posts and media appearances, "wolf warriors" also carry out traditional diplomatic work.

The "wolf warrior" phenomenon is far from encompassing the totality of the Chinese diplomatic apparatus. Nevertheless, it has attracted a lot of attention on social networks and in the media because of the very aggressive messages that characterize it, but also because of its singular messengers – diplomats, who are not usually inclined to this type of public and virtual invectives. Strangely enough for the Chinese context, if President Xi Jinping or Foreign Minister Wang Yi have not been active in these "campaigns", they have also done nothing to prevent "wolf warriors" from acting. The main purpose of this research paper is not to determine whether "wolf warrior" diplomacy is a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated strategy,⁴ although there is little doubt that the CCP at least tacitly supports this new trend and even seems to reward those who implement it.⁵

The CCP's tacit approval seems surprising for several reasons. Usually, the strategies of a state's "public diplomacy" seek to win over international public opinion or, at the very least, public opinion of targeted countries.⁶ On the contrary, "wolf warrior" diplomacy has not helped to improve the perception of China in its region, nor for that matter within the Western world. Mattingly and Sundquist, researchers at Yale University, have shown that in India, for example, the perception of China improved when China organized positive public diplomacy campaigns, but tended to be tarnished by aggressive "wolf warrior"

1. This term, which we shall use for practical reasons, has been spread by the *Financial Times*.

2. Wu Jing, 战狼 [*Wolf Warrior I*], 2015; Wu Jing, 战狼II [*Wolf Warrior II*], 2017.

3. Clifford Coonan, "[China bares teeth in 'Wolf Warrior' trade diplomacy](#)", *Deutsche Welle*, November 25, 2020.

4. For a detailed analysis of this aspect, see Marc Julienne and Sophie Hanck, "Diplomatie chinoise : de 'l'esprit combattant' aux 'loups guerriers'", *Politique étrangère*, 86:1, 2021, p. 105-118.

5. In December 2020 *The Financial Times* explained that Zhao Lijian supposedly owed his promotion to the position of spokesperson at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to his incessant attacks against criticism of Chinese foreign policy. See Christian Sheperd, "[The provocateur leading China's 'wolf-warrior' pack](#)", *Financial Times*, December 8, 2020.

6. Stephen Collins *et al.* explain that "the contemporary acceptance of public diplomacy includes the cumulative actions of a state to influence the beliefs or perceptions of the foreign public" (Stephen Collins *et al.*, "Hashtag Diplomacy: Twitter as a Tool for Engaging in Public Diplomacy and Promoting US Foreign Policy", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 15:2, 2019, p. 79-80).

campaigns.⁷ In European countries, when “wolf warriors” in office directly challenged their host countries or Western actors more broadly through tweets or tribunes, they faced public⁸ and institutional⁹ condemnation. A Pew Research Center study even shows that the perception of China in “advanced economies”¹⁰ has reached a historic low this year, following an already declining trend since 2017-2018.¹¹

Since “wolf warrior” diplomacy does not contribute to the improvement of China’s already damaged image within international public opinion, whether Asian or Western, one can therefore wonder about the reasoning behind China’s pursuit of such a strategy. This note offers an explanation to the CCP’s motivation to “let slip” the “wolf warriors” of China’s diplomatic corps even though it does not appear to improve China’s image abroad.

By analyzing Chinese officials’ discourses on “wolf warrior” diplomacy as well as academic sources, we will show that “wolf warrior” diplomacy’s primary purpose is to legitimize the CCP in the eyes of its own population and Chinese people overseas. This explains why the Party continues to support it even though international public opinion of China deteriorates within the region and in the Western world. Three indicators allow us to reach such a conclusion.

1) The visibility of the “wolf warrior” campaigns in China through their wide dissemination on social networks such as Wechat and Weibo but also on Chinese national media.

2) The constant and subtle references to the “century of humiliation” and the victimization of China in CCP speeches in reaction to the discontent expressed by Western targets of the “wolf warriors”.

3) The periodic reminders of the cultural divide between China and the West highlighting an “unbridgeable split” between “us” (the Chinese people) and “them” (西方, “the West”).

“WOLF WARRIOR” DIPLOMACY: A COUNTER NARRATIVE TO THE CHINA THREAT THEORY

Since the gradual return of China as a player on the international scene at the end of the 1970s, the country has regularly been presented – in the political arena as well as in the academic sphere¹² – as a “threat”. The China threat theory is based on the principle that

7. Daniel Mattingly and James Sundquist, “Public Diplomacy and Its Limits”, January 26, 2021, p. 2.

8. An example would be the indignation of the research community and the French national media following the characterization of Antoine Bondaz, a China researcher at the FRS, as a “petty thug”.

9. Following the statements of the Chinese embassy in France, the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Le Drian summoned the Chinese ambassador on April 14, 2020 and again in March 2021 in order to warn him not to repeat the same behavior.

10. Term used by the Pew Research Center to refer to the countries in which the China Perceptions Study was conducted. These include France, Germany, Australia, Belgium, Canada, South Korea, Denmark, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

11. In France, for example, 70% of respondents have an unfavorable opinion of China, compared to 49% five years ago. See Laura Silver et al., “Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries”, Pew Research Center: Global Attitudes and Trends, October 6, 2020, p. 8.

12. Listed here after are some examples of academic approaches to these discussions: Thomas Christensen, “Chinese Realpolitik”, *Foreign Affairs*, 50:2, 1995, p. 324-348; Zheng Bijian, “China’s Peaceful Rise to Great Power Status”, *Foreign Affairs*, 84:5, 2005, p. 18-24; Yong Deng, “Reputation and the Security Dilemma: China Reacts to the China Threat Theory”, in Ian Johnston et Robert Ross (eds.), “*New Directions in the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy*,”

China, relying on its growing economic, technological and military power, will seek to dominate its region, i.e. to become its “hegemon”.¹³ This scenario conveys a risk, that of the “Thucydides trap” which would translate into a “large scale conflict” between the existing hegemonic power (in this case, the United States) and the would-be hegemon (China).¹⁴

In the mid-1990s, journalists were already questioning the basis of the “China threat” theory. Then, around 2005, a debate erupted on the notions of *peaceful rise* and *peaceful development* promoted by Beijing. Finally, a further discussion of *China’s assertiveness* took place in the 2010s.¹⁵ These debates about the “China threat” are perceived by Beijing as stemming from the United States and its allies in order to limit China’s room for maneuver both internally – by presenting the Chinese regime as oppressive – and externally – with each Chinese action adding to the threat.

The “China threat” theory is consistently refuted by Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons and by Minister Wang Yi himself.¹⁶ For example, when asked directly about the issue, spokeswoman Hua Chunying replied, “the world is big enough and the international scene is wide enough to accommodate Sino-American interactions and peaceful coexistence between China and the United States”.¹⁷

Furthermore, for many years the Chinese authorities have been trying to impose a counter narrative to China threat theory. In the early 2000, they tried to present China’s rise as peaceful through the accepted expression *peaceful development*. Indeed, after internal debates within the CCP about the notion of *peaceful rise*, it was decided that the use of the term *peaceful development* was preferable because of the potentially bellicose connotation of the term *rise*. Following this arbitration, the Chinese government published two white papers on the concept of peaceful development: the first in 2005, entitled *China’s Peaceful Development Road*, and a second in 2011, *China’s Peaceful Development*. These documents, published in English on the Department of Information’s website (unavailable nowadays), were for a foreign audience and were meant to remove ambiguity about China’s development intentions while reassuring its neighbors.¹⁸ Recent research suggests the Chinese government’s public diplomacy has been relatively successful in China’s immediate region. Custer *et al.* studied China’s public diplomacy between 2000 and 2019 in East Asia and concluded that the dissemination of a counter-narrative about China’s rise had the effect

Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 186-214; John Mearsheimer, “China’s Unpeaceful Rise”, *Current History*, 105:690, 2006, p. 160-162; Jonathan Kirshner, “The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China”, *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:53, p. 53-75; Alastair Ian Johnston, “How New and Assertive is China’s New Assertiveness?”, *International Security*, 37:4, 2013, p. 7-48; John Ikenberry, “Racing Toward Tragedy? China’s Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific and the Security Dilemma”, *International Security*, 39:2, 2014, p. 52-91.

13. Theories vary on whether it is because of the structural nature of the international system or because of China’s unique set of characteristics that China is bidding for hegemony.

14. Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydide’s Trap?* Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

15. For a Chinese perspective on the evolution of this debate since the cold war see 苏珊珊 [Su Shanshan], “冷战后“中国威胁论”的历史演变” [“China Threat Theory” since the end of the Cold War], *社会主义研究* [Journal of Socialism], vol. 2, p. 140-147.

16. Wang Yi, “[State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press](#)”, March 8, 2021.

17. “世界很大，国际舞台也很广，足够容纳中美两国良性互动，和平友好共存” in Chinese (Hua Chunying, Minister of Foreign Affairs, [regular press Conference of 07/11/2017](#)).

18. Simone Dossi, “Beyond the ‘Cognitive Iron Curtain’. China’s White Paper on Peaceful Development”, *The International Spectator*, 47:2, 2017, p. 124-126.

of silencing the most critical voices against the country in the media of targetted countries from 2009 onward.¹⁹

Today, “wolf warriors” further this similar objective, although the tone and the means used have changed drastically. Indeed, on one hand, discussion of “wolf warriors” in the Western media is perceived by Chinese officials as a new episode of the narrative of the China threat. In December 2020, in a speech given at Renmin University’s Chongyang Finance Research Institute that was highly publicized in China, Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng spoke at length about the “so-called warrior wolf diplomacy”²⁰ and denounced its invention by China’s critics: “Obviously, ‘warrior wolf diplomacy’ is a new version of the ‘China threat theory’, a new ‘discursive trap’. The aim is to ensure that we do not retaliate when we are attacked, that we do not respond when we are insulted, that we abandon all resistance”.²¹

Ironically, the Party also recognizes the usefulness of “wolf warriors” in further developing the counter-discourse to the “China threat” theory. An example of this is the now famous quote from the Chinese Embassy in France about China researcher Antoine Bondaz: “If there really were ‘wolf warriors’, this would be because there are too many ‘crazy hyenas’, including those who dress up as researchers and media who furiously attack China.”²² “Wolf warriors” are thus presented in a contradictory way both as the figment of Western discourse on the Chinese threat but also as a response to that threat.

A TYPE OF DIPLOMACY FOR DOMESTIC USE DESPITE ITS DISSEMINATION ON WESTERN NETWORKS

At first glance, the target audience of the counter-narrative conveyed by the “wolf warriors” cannot be the Chinese population for one simple reason: Twitter, where much of their activity takes place, is not directly accessible in China.²³ Yet, it should be noted that even if the Chinese population does not have direct access to Western social networks, many tweets are translated, forwarded and commented on Wechat or Sina Weibo, the main

19. Custer et al., “Influencing the Narrative: How the Chinese Government Mobilizes Student and Media to Burnish its Image”, Williamsburg VA, AidData, William & Mary, 2019, p. 23.

20. No transcript or full translation of the Vice Minister’s speech was found. However, a part of the transcript is available [here](#), the press release in English can also be found in this [link](#). There are significant differences between the Chinese transcript and the English report of the event.

21. “显而易见，战狼外交”实际上是“中国威胁论”的又一翻版，是又一个“话语陷阱”，目的就是要让我们打不还手，骂不还口，放弃抗争” in chinese (“外交部副部长谈‘战狼外交’‘四面树敌’ [The Vice Foreign Minister discusses “wolf warrior diplomacy” and “enemies on all sides”], 重庆晨报 [Chong Qing Morning News], December 5, 2020). Another example is given by Hua Chunying: “!给中国扣上 这顶帽子，威胁和讹诈中方，让中方放弃说出事实真相的权利” which means “By sticking this label [of “wolf warrior” diplomacy] on China, it is threatened and forced to give up its right to tell the truth” in 华春莹 [Hua Chunying], [[Foreign Ministry Daily Press Conference, December 10, 2020](#)], [December 10, 2020](#).

22. Chinese embassy in France, “A democratic discussion on freedom of speech”, March 21, 2021 (<http://www.amb-chine.fr/fra/zfzj/t1862928.htm>).

23. Western social networks including Twitter remain accessible from mainland China if the user has a VPN. However, this requires that the user knows that these platforms exist, reads a minimum of English and has a VPN, which is often not free. For more information on Xi Jinping’s internet policy, see Elizabeth Enconomy, “[The Great Firewall of China: Xi Jinping’s Internet Shutdown](#)”, *The Guardian*, June 29, 2018.

social networks used in China. The actions of the “wolf warriors” are also exposed in television programs such as “Opinions in China” on CCTV-4, under the watchful eye of the censors, who choose the approach according to what the Party wishes to show.²⁴ In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, regularly comments on the scuffles between Chinese and Western officials on social networks in its daily press conferences.²⁵ It is interesting to note that the people in charge of these press conferences (Hua Chunying, Zhao Lijian and Wang Wenbin) are also among the most active “wolf warriors” on social networks. Their speeches and tweets are featured in national media press campaigns – such as the one launched on January 22, 2021, by the People’s Daily (人民日报) on the social network Sina Weibo about the origin of Covid-19. The captions of the broadcasts feature quotes from Hua Chunying and Zhao Lijian discussing the origin of the coronavirus and portraying the Fort Detrick military research center in the United States as the source of the disease’s spread. Above the explanations of the two spokespeople, one can read the following injunctions: “Tell the truth!”, “Open an investigation!”, “Answer the questions!”, etc.

Thus, despite the ban on Twitter in mainland China, the actions of the “wolf warriors” are well and truly made visible on social networks and in the Chinese media by some of the officials who implement it and, more broadly, by the entire Chinese media sphere that relays this information.

The main reason why “warrior wolf” diplomacy is shown to the Chinese population is that its primary objective is to legitimize the CCP’s international action in the eyes of its own population, but also in the eyes of overseas Chinese who follow the same media via the Internet and cable. This partly explains the somewhat surprising degree of aggressiveness that can be seen on social networks from Chinese officials. The objective for the Party is to prove to its own population that China is “not afraid to show its teeth” and to counter the “China threat” theory.

REFERENCE TO THE CENTURY OF HUMILIATION AS A WAY TO PLEASE CHINESE NATIONALISTS

Speaking in December 2020, Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng said, “I suspect that these people [those who talk about “wolf warrior diplomacy”] have not yet woken up from their old dream of a hundred years ago.”²⁶ A few days later, Hua Chunying, head spokesperson and chief of the foreign ministry’s information office, also made a historical reference at a press conference, arguing that “these folks must understand that China today is not the China of a hundred years ago”.²⁷ The “people” and “folks” in question in these two quotes

24. “中国舆论场” in Chinese. Here is an example of a recap in Chinese of a program on the diplomacy of “wolf warriors” that aired in December 2020 [here](#). The title of the recap can be translated as follows: “Ministry of Foreign Affairs: preserving national dignity and interests - what’s wrong with being a ‘wolf warrior’?”

25. All press conferences of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are available in Chinese on the [official Wechat account of MOFA spokespersons](#).

26. “我怀疑这些人还没有从100年前的旧梦里醒来” in Chinese (“外交部副部长谈“战狼外交”“四面树敌” [Deputy Foreign Minister discusses “wolf warrior diplomacy” and “enemies on all sides”]).

27. “但这些人应该明白，中国不是一百年前的中国了” in Chinese (华春莹 [Hua Chunying], [[Daily Press Conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 10, 2020](#)]).

refer to foreign – mainly Western – media and political personnel who talk about “wolf warrior” diplomacy in their public appearances, on social networks, or in newspapers.²⁸ The “old dream of a hundred years ago” refers to the century of humiliation, including the European invasions of the Opium Wars and the Japanese invasion that preceded World War II.

Before the first Opium War (1840), China considered itself – as its Chinese name suggests – as the “center of the world”. Until then, it had perceived itself as the “heart of refined culture and moral superiority”.²⁹ The next period, the century of humiliation alluded to by Le Yucheng (1840-1949), constituted a major identity crisis for China.³⁰

This narrative has been used several times in contemporary Chinese history. First, by Mao Zedong to draw attention to the inefficiency and decadence of the last Qing dynasty and to legitimize the creation of a communist one-party state of which one mission would be the restoration of China’s place in the world. Then, after the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping returned to the century of humiliation rhetoric in order to revive Chinese nationalism and give new legitimacy to the one-party system whose Marxist-Leninist discourse was losing its edge. All subsequent Chinese leaders have nurtured this nationalism, which is one of the pillars of the CCP’s legitimacy today.

The reference to the century of humiliation and its connection to “wolf warrior” diplomacy is intended to appeal to nationalist sentiments in the Chinese population – and thus to shift the blame onto former invaders, that is to say primarily the West. Indeed, since 1991, school curricula in China have been modified. In the new textbooks, the focus on class struggle has been replaced by a narrative that presents the West as the cause of all the ills that China experienced in the century before Mao came to power.³¹ As a result, a number of China scholars are debating the existence of a “patriotic generation” of Chinese youth who have been fed this discourse and are eager for revenge.³² While the empirical evidence on the existence of such a generation offers mixed results, the fact remains that some anti-Western or anti-Japanese nationalist demonstrations gained significant momentum in China in the early twenty-first century. They had the Party’s acquiescence and even its encouragement.³³

28. One example is the head of the diplomatic representation of the European Union delegation in Beijing, Nicolas Chapuis, who called on Europe and the United States to say “no” to “wolf warrior” diplomacy. See “Europe, US should say ‘no’ to China’s wolf-warrior diplomacy: EU envoy”, Reuters, December 10, 2020.

29. Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 72.

30. William Callahan, “History, Identity and Security: Producing and Consuming Nationalism in China”, *Critical Asian Studies*, 38:2, 2006, p. 179-208; Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation*.

31. Wang Zheng, “National Humiliation, History Education and the Politics of Historical Memory”, *International Studies Quarterly*, 52:4, 2008, p. 784.

32. Currently the debate on this subject mainly opposes Alastair Ian Johnston and Jessica Chen Weiss. See Alastair Ian Johnston, “Is Chinese Nationalism Rising? Evidence from Beijing”, *International Security*, 41:3, 2017, p. 7-43; and Jessica Chen Weiss, “How Hawkish is the Chinese Public? Another Look at “Rising Nationalism” and Chinese Foreign Policy”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28:119, 2019, p. 679-695.

33. Examples include the anti-American demonstrations in the aftermath of the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by a U.S. NATO aircraft in 1999, and the anti-Japanese demonstrations in the spring of 2005. Jessica Chen Weiss demonstrates in her article (Jessica Chen Weiss, “Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences and Nationalist Protest in China,” *International Organization*, 67:1, 2013, p. 1-35) that China allowed some nationalist protests (the two mentioned above) but banned others, such as those that Chinese nationalists wanted to organize

Reference to the century of humiliation is intended to reopen the narcissistic wound and to direct the anger and frustration of Chinese citizens against clearly identified external “enemies”. The real target of the offensive campaigns of the “wolf warriors”, whether implemented by central government officials or by ambassadors posted abroad, are above all the Chinese population and Chinese people living overseas, who are the intended targets of this narrative.

Thus, this diplomacy of the “wolf warriors” must be considered as a means of legitimizing the regime domestically. For this, it is useful to show strength, including in the verbal sparring that increasingly characterizes social networks – a strength that is also highlighted by the very same actors to praise the regime’s efficiency in managing Covid-19 compared to the record of Western democracies.³⁴ The aim is to tarnish the image of democratic regimes in order to make the actions of the CCP, and with it the actions of authoritarian countries, more acceptable – even desirable.

All this is not to say that the Party is indifferent to China’s image abroad, quite the contrary. However, it is sensitive to it insofar as this image is important in the eyes of its population and plays a significant role in keeping the Party in power. The Chinese authorities are above all concerned about the perception of China’s external action by its own population. The reference made to the century of humiliation, which is not well known to the general public in the West, is in line with a “wolf warrior” diplomacy aimed at a Chinese audience or one of Chinese descent.

THE “INSURMOUNTABLE CULTURAL INCOMPATIBILITY” AIMED AT DEEPENING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN THE “US” AND THE “THEM”.

The term “wolf warrior diplomacy” is dismissed as culturally insensitive by Chinese Foreign ministry officials. According to Le Yucheng, the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, “to label us in this way shows, at best, an incomprehension of Chinese diplomacy”.³⁵ In an interview, Ruan Zongze, a renowned researcher at the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s research center, the China Institute for International Studies (CIIS), explains that the term of wolf warrior diplomacy “is a misguided and misleading interpretation of Chinese diplomacy”.³⁶ At a press conference on May 24, 2020, when asked by a reporter whether “wolf warrior” diplomacy was the new norm of Chinese diplomacy, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the

following the collision between an American EP-3 reconnaissance plane and a Chinese fighter plane in 2001, which caused the death of the Chinese pilot and forced the American pilot to make an emergency landing in China.

34. In June 2020, as Western democracies struggled with the epidemic of Covid-19, the Chinese government published a very detailed [white paper](#) on China’s management of the crisis. [Chinese media](#) covered positively and in detail the elements presented by the government.

35. “« 给我们贴这个标签，至少是对中国外交的误解 »” in chinese ([“外交部副部长谈‘战狼外交’‘四面树敌’ \[The Vice Foreign Minister discusses “wolf warrior diplomacy” and “enemies on all sides”\]](#)).

36. “中国国际问题研究院常务副院长阮宗泽在接受澎湃新闻（[www.thepaper.cn](#)）采访时表示，战狼外交’ 这个词是对中国外交的一种曲解和误导”，澎湃 [The Paper], [“观察 | 王毅首谈“战狼外交”，当下中国外交背后有怎样的逻辑” \[Analysis: What is the thinking behind “wolf warrior diplomacy”?\]](#), May 25, 2020.

question was a poor one.³⁷ Finally, Hua Chunying, after mocking the German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* for illustrating an article with the Chinese character 杈 (fork) instead of 权 (power), uses this blunder to allege that “in reality, this beginner’s mistake is not surprising, because nowadays some people who clearly know nothing about China make accusations against it based on hot air”.³⁸ In other words, Chinese officials and observers concur in shifting blame onto Western media, politicians and analysts who do not understand China.

This argument is a classic lever of Chinese diplomacy. When the CCP is the target of criticism from Western media, it puts forward the argument of cultural misunderstanding. The “wolf warriors” are no exception. By debating them, the Chinese authorities are emphasizing the alleged differences between Chinese and Western cultures. They seek to harness the cultural argument to consolidate the “us” (the Chinese population and the Chinese abroad) and to alienate the “them” by pointing to the fact that Western countries supposedly do not understand China. Anne Cheng, a professor at the Collège de France, states in an interview that the CCP uses the cultural argument to explain that China “doesn’t need democracy, pretexting that it isn’t part of its culture”.³⁹

Indeed, the lack of democracy in China is a stumbling block for Chinese authorities. Having sent tens of millions of students abroad, particularly to the United States, they cannot hide from the population the existence of other types of regimes that combine economic success with individual freedoms. The cultural divide, invoked here by the CCP to cut off debate, allows the government to claim that China’s specific cultural conditions are not suitable for a democratic regime. Wang Yi, at a press conference on March 7, 2021, argues, for example, that “Choice of system should be made in a tailor-made way, rather than through trimming the feet to fit the shoes. Whether a path works for a country depends on how it fits the country’s conditions.”⁴⁰

Moreover, the cultural argument or the strategic use of the cultural divide is not exclusive to the CCP. Olivier Roy, a researcher specializing in the Middle East, describes this same mechanism in a very different context: “what I have discovered in thirty years is precisely how Afghans and Iranians have integrated this double register, in order to play on it, sometimes imitating Texans negotiating an oil contract, sometimes withdrawing into the unfathomable cultural difference”.⁴¹ Roy highlights the strategic usage of cultural difference to serve the interests of those who make use of it, as it allows them to dismiss arguments in one fell swoop without engaging in debate. Certain elements are thus strategically rejected by Chinese officials and intellectuals in the description of wolf warrior diplomacy.

One of the most irritating elements for the CCP is the Western media’s definition of wolf warrior diplomacy as an offensive strategy. Chinese officials portray wolf warrior

37. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “[Press Conference for the Third Session of the Thirteenth National People’s Congress](#)”, May 24, 2020.

38. “但其实这个低级错误也不奇怪，因为的确，现在有些人经常明明对中国一无所知，却煞有其事地对中国进行着无中生有的指责” in Chinese (华春莹 [Hua Chunying], [[Foreign Ministry Daily Press Conference, December 10, 2020](#)]).

39. Nicolas Weill, “Anne Cheng : en finir avec l’altérité chinoise”, *Le Monde*, February 19, 2021.

40. Wang Yi Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China, “State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meet the Press”, in English.

41. Olivier Roy, *En quête de l’Orient perdu*, interviews with Jean-Louis Schlegel, Seuil, “Points”, 2017, p. 255.

diplomacy never as offensive but always as a defensive response to even indirect or diffuse attacks.

The argument is all the more important because the Party portrays Chinese culture – or one of the “Chinese characteristics” – as a defensive culture. This partly matches Western discourses, or even stereotypes, of Chinese strategic culture, with systematic reference to Sun Zi’s *The Art of War* and its most famous quote: “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting”. Moreover, Hua Chunying underlines this aspect by specifying that “aggressiveness has never been part of our diplomatic tradition”.⁴² For example, with regard to the French researcher Antoine Bondaz, the Chinese embassy in France states in its press release that “the embassy responded to verbal provocations by a so-called ‘French specialist on China’”.⁴³ The Chinese statement thus presents the embassy’s actions as defensive, even though the content of the remarks was particularly aggressive, in order to dress this behavior in the characteristics of Chinese culture. Wang Yi, China’s Foreign Minister, said at a press conference in May: “We do not pick fights or bully others, but we have principles and guts. We will push back against any deliberate insult to resolutely defend our national honor and dignity”.⁴⁴

Vice Minister Le Yucheng said, “today, some come to our very doorstep to intimidate us, to interfere in our domestic affairs, to insult us. We have our backs to the wall and cannot further give way. We must firmly defend our national interests and our dignity”.⁴⁵ Hua Chunying also says: “Faced with the harassment of the hegemon, Mao Zedong used to say: ‘If they don’t offend me, I don’t offend anyone. If others offend me, then I must offend in return’”.⁴⁶ According to its officials, China has no choice but to use an offensive online strategy, but for strictly defensive purposes, as its cultural traits force it to do so. Chinese officials, in their discourse on “wolf warrior” diplomacy, seek to reconcile an apparently offensive policy with China’s supposedly age-old “defensive” cultural characteristics. Indeed, it is in the name of this unbridgeable cultural divide, used to widen the gap between “us” and “them”, that the CCP justifies its existence and the absence of a democratic experience in China. Thus, the systematic need for Chinese officials to label the words of wolf warriors as “defensive” is a testament to the constraint that “Chinese characteristics” place, and will continue to place, on China’s external actions.

42. “咄咄逼人从来不是我们的外交传统” in Chinese (华春莹 [Hua Chunying], [[Foreign Ministry Daily Press Conference, December 10, 2020](#)]).

43. Chinese embassy in France, “a democratic discussion on freedom of speech”, March 21, 2021, <http://www.amb-chine.fr/fra/zfzj/t1862928.htm>.

44. Wang Yi, Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China, “Press Conference for the Third Session of the Thirteenth National People’s Congress”, May 24, 2020; in English.

45. « 现在恰恰是别人到我们家门口耀武扬威，对我们的家务事横加干涉，还喋喋不休地对我们进行辱骂抹黑，我们无路可退，不得不奋起自卫，坚定捍卫国家利益和尊严 » in Chinese ([“外交部副部长谈‘战狼外交’‘四面树敌’”](#) [[The Vice Foreign Minister discusses “wolf warrior diplomacy” and “enemies on all sides”](#)]).

46. “面对霸权霸凌，毛泽东同志早就讲过，人不犯我，我不犯人，人若犯我，我必犯人” in Chinese (华春莹 [Hua Chunying], [[Foreign Ministry Daily Press Conference, December 10, 2020](#)]).

CONCLUSION

“Wolf warrior” diplomacy will continue to make headlines. Despite the originality of the aggressive tone of Chinese diplomats on social networks, the objective of this strategy – to legitimize the CCP domestically – is identical to those sought by previous Chinese foreign policies. The frequent references to the century of humiliation are intended to reopen the narcissistic wound of Chinese nationalists, while the perceived “cultural divide” between China and the West is exacerbated in order to unify the country around the Party and alienate competing democratic regimes.

It is still too early to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of “wolf warrior” diplomacy among the Chinese population and Chinese overseas. It does, however, entail significant risks for the Chinese authorities both internally and internationally. As far as the domestic sphere and overseas Chinese are concerned, the existing gap between the words of the “wolf warriors” and the policy pursued by the CCP, especially if widened, could lead China to fall into a “rhetorical trap⁴⁷” and thus make suboptimal, even unnecessarily bellicose or irrational decisions. Indeed, the tone of the rhetoric suggests that Chinese actions are about to get tougher. If the Chinese government is capitalizing on nationalism by implementing “wolf warrior” diplomacy, it could also suffer if its actions do not “live up” to the rhetoric. The Party could thus find itself caught between appeasement solutions that would be legitimate, logical and desirable and a population that would demand the path of confrontation promised by the CCP.

Outside China’s borders, the negative effects on China’s image, particularly in the West, are already noticeable. While the existence of a regime partly depends on its legitimacy in the eyes of its population, the perception of a state by its peers largely determines its room for manoeuvre on the international scene. Thus, the deterioration of China’s image abroad due to the actions of the “wolf warriors” feeds the discourse on the Chinese threat that it is supposed to counter, giving it more credibility and promoting public policies hostile to China. China’s actions in its region including wolf warrior diplomacy, but also more generally and in particular its recent policies in the China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, risk alienating its neighbors.

If until now China was perceived essentially in terms of its potential for nuisance or its potential for cooperation, today its growing involvement on the international scene favors a perception of China that is more linked to its actions. This is an opportunity for China to disavow the “China threat theory” through its actions, but “wolf warrior diplomacy” isn’t a step in that direction.

47. See Franck Schimmelfennig, “The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union”, *International Organization*, 55:1, 2001, p. 47-80.

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