

The Evolution of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: Considerations on the Future of Chinese Diplomacy in the Information Age

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Abstract- This paper analyzes the evolution of Chinese diplomacy in the post-Cold War and post-pandemic periods, focusing on the transformation of “wolf warrior” diplomacy and its implications for China’s global role. It argues that China’s approach to security and foreign policy has expanded beyond military concerns to include economic, political, and informational dimensions, while still reflecting realist priorities such as sovereignty and national interest. At the same time, China increasingly combines assertive rhetoric with efforts to enhance its international image through public diplomacy and soft power. By examining key initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), the paper highlights China’s attempt to reshape global governance and position itself as a responsible global actor. The study concludes that China’s diplomatic strategy is undergoing a pragmatic recalibration, balancing assertiveness with cooperation in order to maintain influence and credibility in the evolving international system.

Index Terms- China; wolf warrior diplomacy; soft power; public diplomacy; global governance; international relations; information age; foreign policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the concept of security has undergone profound transformations, particularly in the post-Cold War era, when traditional military-centered understandings expanded to encompass economic, political, technological, and societal dimensions. Within this shifting landscape, China has progressively redefined its own security paradigm. During the Cold War, Beijing’s strategic outlook was largely framed by military threats stemming from both the United States and the Soviet Union. However, contemporary Chinese security thinking reflects a broader and more complex understanding, integrating internal stability, economic resilience, and international influence as interconnected components of national security.

Despite this conceptual expansion, elements of realist thinking continue to shape Chinese foreign policy behavior. The prioritization of national interests, sovereignty, and strategic autonomy remains central, yet the distinction between domestic and international security has become increasingly blurred. For an authoritarian system such as China’s, internal political stability is inseparable from external positioning. Issues such as territorial integrity, regime legitimacy, and social cohesion intersect with geopolitical competition, creating a multilayered security framework that challenges conventional analytical categories in international relations.

Parallel to these developments, China has significantly intensified its efforts to shape its international image. Beginning in the 1990s and accelerating under the leadership of Xi Jinping, Beijing has invested heavily in constructing a favorable global narrative. The emphasis on “telling China’s story well” reflects a deliberate strategy to counter negative perceptions and assert discursive influence. This approach extends across multiple domains, including global media networks, cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and digital communication platforms, illustrating the growing importance of narrative construction as a tool of statecraft.

Debates surrounding China’s public diplomacy and soft power reveal divergent interpretations regarding both effectiveness and intent. On one hand, critics argue that China’s efforts are overly state-centric, limiting their credibility and organic appeal. On the other hand, there is evidence that such initiatives have improved China’s image in parts of the developing world, where it is increasingly viewed as an economic partner rather than a strategic threat. This duality underscores the complexity of assessing soft power in non-Western contexts, where state involvement does not necessarily undermine legitimacy in the same way it might in liberal democracies.

Finally, understanding China’s trajectory requires moving beyond both Western universalism and narratives of Chinese exceptionalism. Recent global events—including the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, and ideological debates about governance—have intensified scrutiny of China’s role in the international system. These developments highlight the necessity of adopting more nuanced analytical frameworks that account for China’s historical experiences, political structures, and evolving strategic ambitions, particularly in the digital and informational domains.

II. CONTEMPORARY CHINESE DIPLOMACY: BETWEEN ASSERTIVENESS AND ACCOMMODATION

China’s contemporary diplomatic posture is characterized by a tension between two seemingly contradictory identities. On one hand, the so-called “wolf warrior” diplomacy embodies a more assertive and confrontational style, often manifested through direct and combative rhetoric, particularly on digital platforms. This approach seeks to defend national interests and counter external criticism with unprecedented intensity. On the other hand, China simultaneously strives to present itself as a responsible global actor, committed to stability, cooperation, and multilateral engagement.

This duality reflects deeper uncertainties about China’s position in the international system. Analytical frameworks suggest that Chinese behavior can oscillate depending on whether the leadership perceives the current global context as favorable or threatening, and whether it views China’s own position as strong or vulnerable. These perceptions give rise to varying forms of

assertiveness, ranging from opportunistic to reactive, each shaping diplomatic conduct in distinct ways. As a result, China's foreign policy often appears inconsistent, alternating between confidence and caution.

At the same time, Beijing has increasingly attempted to recalibrate its diplomatic strategy in response to international backlash. While assertive rhetoric has not disappeared, there is growing emphasis on reducing tensions in bilateral relations, albeit on terms that preserve China's strategic interests. This indicates a shift toward a more controlled and selective use of assertiveness, rather than its complete abandonment. Such adjustments suggest that China is learning from the reputational costs associated with overly aggressive diplomacy.

The evolution of China's media and communication apparatus further illustrates this strategic adaptation. Significant investments have been made in expanding global media presence and enhancing international communication capabilities. However, despite these efforts, Chinese media outlets continue to face challenges in achieving global influence comparable to Western counterparts. This gap highlights structural limitations in China's ability to shape global narratives, even as it seeks to expand its informational reach.

Moreover, China's engagement with global communication systems reflects broader ambitions to influence the architecture of international discourse. By promoting alternative perspectives on development, governance, and global order, China is not only responding to existing narratives but actively seeking to reshape them. This ambition underscores the importance of communication as a strategic domain in contemporary international relations.

Contemporary Chinese diplomacy must be understood as a dynamic and adaptive process shaped by both systemic pressures and domestic imperatives. As China's global footprint has expanded, so too has the complexity of its diplomatic engagement. No longer confined to a reactive posture, Chinese diplomacy increasingly reflects proactive agenda-setting behavior, particularly in multilateral forums. This shift is closely linked to China's growing economic interdependence with the rest of the world, which necessitates a more sophisticated diplomatic apparatus capable of managing diverse partnerships across regions with differing political, economic, and cultural contexts.

A defining feature of this diplomatic evolution is the institutionalization of communication strategies that operate across traditional and digital platforms. Chinese diplomats have become more visible and vocal, particularly through social media channels, where they engage directly with foreign publics. This development represents a departure from earlier low-profile diplomatic styles and underscores the importance of narrative competition in international politics. However, while this increased visibility enhances China's ability to respond rapidly to criticism, it also exposes its messaging to greater scrutiny and potential backlash.

At the same time, China's diplomatic practice reflects a careful balancing act between sovereignty-centered principles and the demands of global governance. Beijing consistently emphasizes non-interference and respect for national sovereignty, yet it actively participates in international institutions and contributes to global public goods, such as development financing and peacekeeping operations. This dual approach allows China to position itself as both a defender of traditional state-centric norms and a contributor to evolving multilateral frameworks.

Another important dimension of contemporary Chinese diplomacy is its regional differentiation. China does not adopt a uniform approach across all regions; rather, it tailors its diplomatic strategies to local conditions. In developing regions, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, China emphasizes economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and mutual benefit. In contrast, its engagement with Western powers is often more contentious, shaped by ideological differences, strategic competition, and mutual suspicion. This differentiated approach enables China to maximize its influence while mitigating risks associated with direct confrontation.

Domestic political considerations also play a significant role in shaping China's diplomatic behavior. The legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party is closely tied to perceptions of national strength and international respect. As a result, diplomatic actions are often calibrated not only for external audiences but also for domestic consumption. Assertive rhetoric can serve to reinforce nationalist sentiment at home, even when it complicates relations abroad. This interplay between domestic and international objectives adds another layer of complexity to the analysis of Chinese diplomacy.

Finally, contemporary Chinese diplomacy is increasingly characterized by its long-term strategic orientation. Rather than focusing solely on immediate gains, China often adopts a gradualist approach aimed at shaping structural conditions in the international system. This includes efforts to build alternative institutions, expand economic networks, and influence normative debates. While this strategy may not always yield immediate results, it reflects a broader vision of China's role as a central actor in a gradually transforming global order.

III. STRATEGIC INITIATIVES AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

China's recent diplomatic initiatives—such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)—represent a comprehensive effort to redefine its role within the international system. These frameworks articulate an alternative vision of global governance, emphasizing principles such as sovereignty, non-interference, and development-centered security. Collectively, they signal China's ambition to move from a rule-taker to a rule-shaper in global affairs.

The GDI reflects a shift toward addressing global development challenges in a more holistic manner, linking economic growth with broader concerns such as public health, climate change, and digital transformation. Unlike earlier infrastructure-focused strategies, this initiative emphasizes sustainability and multilateral cooperation, suggesting an attempt to respond to criticisms of previous approaches while aligning with global development agendas.

Similarly, the GSI challenges existing security paradigms by advocating for a model based on “indivisible security” and mutual respect among states. This framework implicitly critiques Western-led security arrangements and proposes an alternative that prioritizes dialogue and inclusivity. However, its reception has been mixed, with skepticism arising from concerns about its underlying political implications and practical feasibility.

The GCI introduces an additional layer by focusing on cultural and civilizational dimensions of global governance. By promoting diversity in developmental paths and rejecting universalist models, China positions itself as a defender of pluralism in international relations. This initiative reflects a broader ideological ambition to reshape normative frameworks, extending beyond material power into the realm of ideas and values.

Taken together, these initiatives illustrate a strategic pivot away from purely confrontational diplomacy toward a more sophisticated and multidimensional approach. While challenges remain—particularly in gaining widespread acceptance—these efforts highlight China’s evolving strategy of combining material capabilities with ideological and normative influence.

However, the emergence of “wolf warrior” diplomacy complicates this picture. The assertive rhetoric adopted by Chinese diplomats often contrasts with the cooperative logic emphasized by liberalism. While China continues to promote narratives of economic cooperation and shared development, its increasingly firm responses to external criticism suggest that integration into the global economy does not eliminate geopolitical tensions. Instead, China’s foreign policy reflects a hybrid approach, combining elements of liberal engagement with assertive strategies aimed at defending national interests and international image.

China’s strategic initiatives represent a coordinated attempt to articulate a comprehensive vision of global governance that aligns with its national interests and ideological preferences. These initiatives are not isolated policy tools but components of a broader framework designed to enhance China’s influence in shaping international norms and institutions. By advancing concepts such as development-centered security and civilizational diversity, China seeks to redefine key principles underlying the global order.

One of the central characteristics of these initiatives is their emphasis on inclusivity and flexibility. Unlike rigid institutional frameworks, China’s proposals often allow for varying degrees of participation and adaptation, making them attractive to a wide range of countries, particularly those in the Global South. This flexibility enables China to build broad coalitions of support, even among states with differing political systems and development trajectories. At the same time, it allows Beijing to maintain a leading role in setting the agenda and defining the parameters of cooperation.

Another important aspect is the integration of economic, security, and cultural dimensions within a single strategic vision. Rather than treating these domains separately, China presents them as interconnected components of a holistic approach to global governance. Development is framed as a prerequisite for security, while cultural exchange is positioned as a foundation for mutual understanding and stability. This integrated perspective distinguishes China’s approach from more compartmentalized Western models and reflects its broader conception of international relations.

Despite their ambitious scope, these initiatives face significant challenges in terms of credibility and implementation. Skepticism from Western countries, concerns about transparency, and questions regarding long-term sustainability have limited their acceptance in certain regions. Moreover, the success of these initiatives depends not only on China’s capacity to provide resources but also on its ability to build trust and demonstrate consistency in its commitments. Without broader international endorsement, their transformative potential may remain constrained.

At the same time, these initiatives provide China with a platform to experiment with new forms of international engagement. By promoting alternative norms and practices, China is effectively testing the boundaries of the existing international system. This process is not necessarily aimed at outright replacement of current structures but rather at gradual adaptation and diversification. In this sense, China’s approach can be seen as evolutionary rather than revolutionary, seeking to reshape global governance from within.

Ultimately, China’s strategic initiatives reflect a broader effort to reconcile its rising power status with the expectations of global leadership. By positioning itself as a provider of public goods and a champion of development and stability, China aims to enhance its legitimacy and influence. However, the long-term success of this strategy will depend on its ability to address both external skepticism and internal constraints, as well as to navigate the complex interplay between competition and cooperation in the international system.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the post-pandemic era, the evolution of China’s diplomatic strategy reflects a clear shift away from the excesses of wolf warrior diplomacy toward a more calibrated and pragmatic approach. While assertiveness remains a component of its foreign policy toolkit, it is increasingly complemented by efforts to promote cooperation, multilateralism, and global engagement. This transformation suggests a recognition of the limitations and unintended consequences of overtly confrontational diplomacy.

A key factor driving this recalibration has been the realization that aggressive rhetoric can undermine long-term strategic objectives. Strained relations with key partners and reputational damage have prompted Chinese policymakers to adopt a more balanced approach, seeking to rebuild trust while maintaining core interests. Initiatives such as the GDI, GSI, and GCI exemplify this effort to reposition China as a constructive and responsible global actor.

At the same time, China’s response to major international crises illustrates its careful balancing act between strategic interests and global expectations. Its positioning in conflicts such as the war in Ukraine demonstrates a preference for neutrality, dialogue, and mediation, allowing it to preserve key partnerships while projecting an image of diplomatic responsibility. This approach aligns with its broader ambition to be perceived as a stabilizing force in international politics.

Ultimately, the future of Chinese diplomacy in the information age remains marked by uncertainty. The coexistence of assertive and cooperative tendencies reflects deeper structural tensions within China’s foreign policy. As technological advancements amplify both opportunities and vulnerabilities, China’s ability to navigate this complex environment will depend on how effectively it reconciles these competing identities while maintaining credibility on the global stage.

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