THE RISE AND FALL OF CHINA'S DIGITAL WOLF WARRIOR DIPLOMACY

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
China *Digital diplomacy* *Wolf Warrior* *Twitter* *United States*	*Chinese officials utilise social media platforms to disseminate their discourse on the international stage. The utilisation of 'wolf warrior diplomacy' serves to advance a favourable representation of China's accomplishments while simultaneously denigrating the West through the dissemination of misinformation and the exploitation of social media platforms. Chinese assertiveness is becoming increasingly evident in foreign policy, with the Communist Party playing a pivotal role in coordinating efforts on matters of national interest, including Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as well as in defending policies related to the management of the ongoing pandemic. However, the intensity of digital diplomacy may diminish if Beijing seeks to preserve its relations with the West during a period of transition, such as the one it is currently experiencing.*

1. Introduction

China has become a great power by virtue of its status as the second largest capitalist economy in the world, its formidable military capabilities, its diplomatic influence in shaping the international order, and its extensive propaganda and information control apparatus. The Asian giant has become an alternative model that seeks to change the post-war international order, utilising a range of instruments at its disposal (Singh, 2018).

Following the low-profile approach to international relations adopted by Deng Xiaoping during the 1980s, the current President, Xi Jinping, has assumed a more prominent role. This shift in approach deviates from the peaceful emergence model espoused by his predecessors in the 2000s, namely President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. These leaders had initiated engagement with the multilateral system of international institutions and hosted the 2008 Olympic Games. China did not manifest any hegemonic or revisionist aspirations within the international system at that time. However, following the global economic downturn of 2008, it commenced a process of expansion into Africa and Latin America.

From November 2012, with the ascension of Xi Jinping to the Chinese presidency, the country's foreign policy underwent a notable shift. This was characterised by a greater emphasis on leadership and prominence, reflecting a shift towards greater assertiveness in the international arena. This was evident in the country's greater responsibilities within the United Nations, as well as its more vocal defence of its national security and territorial integrity. China's foreign policy has become more assertive, characterised by the assertion of territorial claims in the South China Sea, the initiation of border disputes with India and the imposition of maritime and air blockades in Taiwan. To illustrate, during the 20th Communist Party Congress, Xi Jinping directed the Chinese military to prepare for potential action in Taiwan should reunification not occur peacefully.

2. From Mask Diplomacy to Wolf Warrior Diplomacy

At the outset of the global health crisis precipitated by the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, a phenomenon known as "mask diplomacy" was employed to enhance China's international reputation as the country of origin of the virus. This involved the dispatch of medical aid and supplies from Beijing, as well as donations from domestic and international Chinese businesses and communities. As the pandemic progressed and China was successful in containing the virus, a new approach to diplomacy emerged, characterised by Chinese diplomats' use of confrontational rhetoric, denouncing criticism of China and adopting a combative stance in interviews and on social media. The term 'Wolf Warrior' has its origins in the film of the same name, which portrays a former Chinese special forces soldier who intervenes in a war in an African country, protecting Chinese citizens. The film posits China's active engagement in global affairs, evincing a certain degree of animosity towards the West and an exaltation of nationalism (Landale, 2020).

China's sustained economic growth over time (ranging from 9.5% in 2011 to 6.7% in 2017) has reached an impasse due to the real estate crisis and the implementation of the "Covid zero strategy," which has resulted in an economic slowdown. Nevertheless, China's status as an alternative economic and political model may be reinforced by the war in Ukraine, prompting a reassessment of communication strategies to convey the developments in China. Beijing is committed to responding to Western discourse, which it perceives as imbalanced and dominated by the West. It aims to challenge this status quo and establish a more equitable international discourse, where China can have a stronger voice (Julienne and Hanck, 2021).

China has undergone a transformation in its approach to defending its core interests, particularly in light of the increasingly critical discourse surrounding its foreign policy. Chinese state media serve as a primary conduit for the dissemination of official discourse on the global stage. In 2016, Beijing established a number of multilingual state media outlets, including CGTN (China Global Television Network), a television channel broadcasting in six languages, as well as official media partnerships with several major international newspapers. Moreover, in recent years there has been a notable increase in the number of official social media accounts, which serve to disseminate and facilitate the discussion of official Chinese discourse. The centralisation and control of external communication should facilitate the construction of a unified international discourse.

The concept of 'wolf warrior diplomacy', as exemplified by the foreign policy of Xi Jinping, represents an evolution of China's diplomatic institutions. It is designed to challenge the prevailing international discourse, which has historically positioned China as a weaker power in comparison to the West (Huang, 2021). The fundamental tenet of 'wolf warrior' diplomacy is the 'fighting spirit' espoused by Xi Jinping, which necessitates a shift in perspective from mechanised warfare to information warfare (Huang, 2021). As China has become a more prominent actor on the global stage, it has adjusted its diplomatic approach in response to both domestic developments, such as rising nationalism, and external factors, including perceptions of threats. This strategic adaptation is part of a broader effort to reshape the existing international order (Yuan, 2023).

Chinese diplomats have historically perceived a lack of appreciation from the Western world. However, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of the belief that China's political system and development model are superior to those of the West. This belief is reinforced by domestic propaganda (Martin, 2021). Diplomats have employed networks to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of China's socialist regime and its model for combating the pandemic. Furthermore, as Huang (2021) elucidates, Chinese diplomats have leveraged X's forwarding functionality to construct a sophisticated content dissemination network with foreign stakeholders, thereby advancing Beijing's interests in nuanced ways. In overseas contexts, numerous embassies have initiated an unparalleled communication campaign, disseminating opinion pieces on their websites and engaging extensively with the host country's media outlets. In addition to the utilisation of institutional communication channels and the deployment of traditional media, a novel phenomenon has emerged, namely the deployment of social networking sites X and Facebook by diplomats, despite the paradoxical prohibition of these platforms within China. The most prominent of these diplomats was Zhao Lijian, the deputy director of the Foreign Ministry's Information Department, who was known for making inflammatory statements (Martin, 2021).

3. Theoretical Framework

China has adopted an international narrative that extends beyond the mere censoring of criticism, encompassing the propagation of disinformation and the utilisation of Russian-style conspiracy theories (Benedicto, 2021). Chinese diplomats disseminated content on X (formerly Twitter) that was characterised by confrontational and conspiratorial rhetoric, with their most followed accounts displaying the greatest combativeness. This shift in Chinese foreign policy has been occurring gradually since 2009, with a notable acceleration following the ascendance of Xi Jinping to the nation's highest political office in 2013. In the aftermath of the pandemic, Chinese diplomats perceived a sense of attack, yet simultaneously a sense of pride in their country's response to the crisis. The confluence of enhanced self-assurance and mounting unease has given rise to a phenomenon that has come to be known as 'wolf-warrior diplomacy'.

The use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram enable diplomats to engage directly with their target audiences, both within and beyond their own countries. This has led to a significant transformation in the practice of diplomacy. Digital diplomacy can be defined as the utilisation of digital technologies as a strategic instrument for achieving specific objectives, engaging with designated target audiences and disseminating content (Bjola, 2018). It is anticipated that digital communication will prove to be a pivotal instrument for all actors in achieving their foreign policy objectives and enhancing their international image.

The concept of digital diplomacy is subsumed within the broader field of public diplomacy. In order to achieve their goals with greater ease in an increasingly complex international system, states employ this form of diplomacy. Cull (2008, pp. 57-58) defines it as "an attempt by an international actor to manage the international environment by engaging with a foreign audience" or as "a mechanism for deploying soft power." In order to achieve this, both the dissemination of information and the cultivation of an external image in international relations are of significant importance (Cull, 2008).

The advent of the online domain presents politicians and officials with novel opportunities to transition from a one-way communication model to a more interactive and engaged approach, including dialogue and international engagement. As Manfredi (2014, p. 346) asserts, "the defence of states' interests now commences on the internet, social networks and new media. In this environment, the

reputation, prestige and influence of a given entity may be strengthened or weakened". The use of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram enable states to engage in direct communication with the target audience, both domestically and internationally. This has led to a significant transformation in the practice of diplomacy. As Surahman (2014, p. 2) asserts, social media represent "a means of influence to create public opinion." Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasise the significant function that Twitter performs in influencing global public opinion at the diplomatic level (Surahman, 2014).

E-diplomacy is an increasingly important tool for reaching out to audiences beyond the government concerned. It is therefore essential to engage with opinion leaders, influencers, journalists and civil society. In the context of an increasingly digitalised world, there is an increased potential for the dissemination of misinformation and hoaxes. Since the onset of the pandemic, China has employed a range of communication strategies and disinformation campaigns to disseminate information about the novel coronavirus (Zabala, 2022). The utilisation of fake news can also be geopolitical in nature, employed to circumvent incursions into one's sphere of influence. This may entail the destabilisation of opponents through the incitement of internal strife or even social unrest from external sources. Twitter represents a pivotal platform for the dissemination of such messages (Manfredi, 2024).

The concept of soft power was not identified as a significant aspect of China's national policy until the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2007. The concept of soft power is attributed to Joseph Nye, who defines it as a form of non-coercive power that has the effect of "getting others to want the results you want 'through the' ability of attraction, [which] leads to acquiescence" (Nye, 2004, pp. 5-6). (Nye, 2004, pp. 5-6). As China grew as an economic power, it began to strengthen its voice and influence in the world, and above all, to foster nationalist sentiment at home and abroad (Sayama, 2016). Beijing employs soft power to appeal to foreign audiences, but this is a facade that conceals disruptive operations that can be described as sharp power. This term, coined by Walker and Ludwig (2017) in Foreign Affairs magazine, refers to the use of manipulative diplomatic policies by one country to influence and undermine another country's political system. Walker and Ludwig (2017) emphasise that sharp power aims to "penetrate or drill into" the political information and environments of targeted countries. This is a form of power that employs policies designed to coerce and manipulate international opinion on behalf of authoritarian regimes. The corrosive effects of sharp power are evident in the spheres of culture, academia, media and publishing. The onslaught on politics and the domain of ideas constitutes a significant threat to democratic processes, intensified by the utilisation of self-censorship or digital instruments such as bots that disseminate false and divisive discourse on social media.

China aspires to assume a more prominent role on the global stage. To this end, it seeks to advance its ideas, norms, and governance models by employing censorship and manipulation tactics, with the aim of undermining the integrity of independent institutions. As Nye (2021) notes, "China must recognise that the majority of a country's soft power stems from its civil society, rather than its government." A key challenge for China in its public diplomacy is the reliance of the actors involved on the control of the Communist Party (Walker, 2018). The Chinese government's repressive system overrides non-state actors, effectively transforming its soft power and public diplomacy into a sharp power that seeks to manipulate or coerce opinions abroad (Benedicto, 2020).

4. Objectives and Methodology

This article aims to examine how China, through its officials, has employed digital diplomacy tools to advance its political model on the global stage, utilising the strategy of the Wolf Warrior. In terms of methodology, the focus will be on X (Twitter), which is one of the most widely used social networks for digital diplomacy. However, it should be noted that there is an important methodological limitation, namely the Great Firewall, which has been established by the Communist Party with the intention of prohibiting access to cyberspace that is critical of Beijing, including Western social networks. China has its own internet and networks, including WeChat and Weibo, which are not accessible to non-Chinese speakers. These platforms are designed for Chinese citizens and the diaspora, rather than for foreign audiences. This limitation is therefore qualified.

This article analyses the two most important official English-language accounts within the Chinese Foreign Ministry's organisational structure on Twitter: the official account of the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (@MFA_China) and that of Hua Chunying

(@SpokespersonCHN), the spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry and director general of the Information Department.

On the other hand, Twitter also hosts the accounts of some of the main state media, such as the People's Daily, the Global Times, Xinhua, CGTN or China Daily, as well as some of their journalists, such as Chen Weihua (@chenweihua), the EU bureau chief of China Daily, known for a very hard line that goes far beyond the wolf-warrior diplomacy of Chinese officials. Despite their editorial direction being influenced by the CCP and their role in disseminating a Chinese narrative on the global stage (Breslin, 2020: 144-145), these media outlets exhibit similarities to the underlying concept of the American Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty or Radio Free Asia, and Russian media such as RT or Sputnik. This is not to suggest that they are merely an unofficial mouthpiece of the Chinese government; rather, they are also shaped by commercial interests and market strategies, which means that they do not always reflect China's foreign policy line. Therefore, although state media are part of China's soft power and propaganda strategy, they cannot be confused with the government or the party. Consequently, their analysis has been avoided, except where they are quoted in the reports analysed.

Since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has undergone a significant shift in its approach to foreign and security policy decision-making. Previously, the CCP operated under a collective leadership structure, wherein the general secretary served as a figurehead within the Central Committee. However, with Xi's ascendance, the party has transitioned towards a more personalized leadership style, exemplifying what is termed "top-level design" (Ríos, 2021: 305-306; Zhao, 2020: 90). Furthermore, the primary foreign policy decision-making bodies are situated within the CCP's organisational structure, as opposed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is part of the State Council (the government). This is a common feature of the Chinese system, in which government bodies are subordinate to the Party (Zhao, 2020: 95). However, neither the CCP nor Xi are active on the social media platform Twitter. In this context, communication is conducted by the ministry and its designated spokespersons.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations, this article will analyse tweets in two distinct timeframes. The first will encompass the period between 17 February 2022 (one week prior to the commencement of the invasion of Ukraine) and 17 March 2022 (three weeks following the onset of hostilities in Ukraine). The second will extend from 1 January 2024 (one and a half months prior to the second anniversary of the conflict) to 10 March 2024 (a couple of weeks following this date).

A quantitative analysis of the aforementioned tweets was conducted in the following manner. Initially, a filter was created to identify tweets pertaining to the conflict, either directly or indirectly, as well as those related to other topics of interest to the ministry. This was done with the aim of observing the government's communication priorities. Subsequently, the number of tweets pertaining to the conflict was quantified using a number of independent criteria. First, the tweets were classified according to their alignment with a Russian, Ukrainian, or neutral narrative of the conflict. This entailed determining whether the content reflected the arguments of one of the two sides, was ambiguous, or was neutral. This will assist in determining which, if any, frame of the conflict Beijing was reinforcing. Secondly, in accordance with the Wolf Warrior Diplomacy model, the tweets were analysed to ascertain the extent of Chinese assertiveness with regard to other issues.

Thirdly, the tweets are analysed in order to identify the general themes that they address. These include, for example, the issues of NATO expansion, sanctions, fascism and the humanitarian crisis. This may serve to identify the aspects of the conflict that Beijing is most interested in or concerned about.

Fourthly, an examination is conducted of which countries, groups of countries, or international organisations, excluding Russia and Ukraine, are directly or indirectly referenced in most tweets. This will enable us to ascertain which foreign actors Beijing perceives as the primary players in the context of its narrative.

Consequently, these data are subjected to a quantitative analysis, which is then complemented by a qualitative analysis focusing on the discursive aspect of the tweets. In doing so, we will endeavour to fulfil the research objectives.

5. Results

In the period preceding the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the two accounts in question published a total of 357 tweets. It is notable that approximately 37% of the total number of tweets, amounting to 131 tweets, were directly or indirectly related to the conflict. However, this does not imply that these tweets were the sole determinants of the conflict's agenda. In addition to tweets pertaining to the war, a considerable number of tweets addressed the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Beijing, as well as relations with other countries and regions, including the United States, the European Union, Southeast Asia, Africa, and India, among others. Consequently, China has not eschewed other matters in its digital diplomacy, where it also displays assertiveness.

Secondly, with regard to the narrative that is espoused, a majority of tweets (62%) present either the same or a pro-Russian narrative. Subsequently, up to 37% of the tweets presented a neutral narrative, neither defending the arguments of Russia nor Ukraine. Ultimately, a mere fraction of the tweets examined—less than one percent—advocate for a Ukrainian perspective, a miniscule proportion in comparison to the Russian viewpoint. In conclusion, it can be stated that China has attempted to portray a favourable image of Russia, its "friend without limits", and has avoided any criticism of the latter while defending its own interests. Subsequently, it will be possible to ascertain the specific ideas and frameworks that China has been promoting, as well as the silences that remain within its discourse.

With regard to the wolf warrior model of diplomacy, it can be observed that up to 67% of tweets, or more than two-thirds, correspond to this type of diplomacy. This is an unambiguous indication that China is acting in an assertive manner in this conflict, seeking to establish its position and challenge alternative narrative frameworks.

The overwhelming majority of tweets that correspond to the wolf warrior diplomacy model (87.5%) have been aimed at reinforcing the Russian narrative framework. This indicates that Beijing has not only reinforced Moscow's arguments for launching the invasion but has done so in an assertive manner. Nonetheless, a considerable number of aggressive tweets have been directed towards the United States on matters pertaining to "US responsibility", "NATO expansion", "bio labs" and allegations of "double standards". These tweets are consistent with the Russian narrative and are aligned with the principles of wolf-warrior diplomacy. For example, the video of Zhao Lijian, the former deputy director of the Foreign Ministry's Information Department, in which he accused the United States of manufacturing biochemical weapons in biological laboratories in Ukraine, was a direct response to accusations made by the United States against Beijing regarding the Wuhan bio-lab virus leak. Zhao was renowned for his incendiary rhetoric and for spearheading a cohort of forthright diplomats (Martin, 2021).

The countries and international organisations most frequently cited are the United States, NATO, the United Nations and the European Union (EU). The tweets emphasise the negative role of the United States, which is held responsible for the conflict, along with NATO's expansion, the dissemination of disinformation and the existence of biological laboratories. In contrast, the data indicates that tweets about the UN portray it in a positive and neutral light.

Chinese public diplomacy via Twitter serves to safeguard Russia and challenge the prevailing Western narrative on the conflict by focusing on issues that Russia deems as justifications for its military intervention, including NATO expansion and the purported presence of weapons of mass destruction on Ukrainian soil. Additionally, Beijing has refrained from employing terminology such as "war," "invasion," or "aggression" when referencing the conflict. However, they have not adopted the Russian approach of referring to it as a "special military operation in Ukraine."

The second analysis of the same Twitter accounts was conducted between 10 January and 10 March 2024, which coincided with the second anniversary of the war in Ukraine. The content of the two accounts, @MFA_China and @SpokespersonCHN, is found to be strikingly similar. The former account has 202 tweets, of which only four pertain to Ukraine. The second account tweets 308 messages, of which only four pertain to the war. The Ukrainian conflict is no longer the primary focus of the two accounts' tweets, which now primarily address the maintenance of the relationship between China and Russia. This relationship is considered strategic for both parties and encourages peace talks.

In this second phase, most of the tweets are directed towards defending China's sphere of influence and launching attacks against rival countries, including the United States, Japan, India, and the Philippines. The People's Republic of China (PRC) considers Taiwan to be a part of China and aspires to a peaceful reunification of Formosa. Additionally, the PRC has criticized the United States for discussing

the island's potential independence. Additionally, Beijing has censured the United Kingdom and the United States for purported interference in Hong Kong. It has also accused Japan of disseminating information regarding the release of contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant, the Philippines of encroaching upon Chinese sovereignty in the South China Sea, and India of facing challenges in the Zangnan region, which China asserts as its territory.

The United States is the country most frequently cited and attacked for a diverse range of issues. These include problems faced by Chinese students in the US due to visa cancellations or interrogations, voting against the ceasefire in Gaza at the UN, alleged cyber-attacks, spying with the CIA, and the trade and technology war between the two powers. The sole point of consensus is the joint defence of the great panda bears. The tweets pertaining to the Global South are uniformly positive, emphasizing that this region will no longer be a "silent majority." The countries cited include Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Indonesia, Liberia, Kenya, South Africa, Brazil, Ecuador and Mexico.

The international organisations most frequently referenced in the tweets are also examined, including the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Australia-United Kingdom-United States Strategic Alliance (AUKUS), the African Union, the World Bank, and the European Union (EU). The United Nations is the most positively referenced entity, along with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union. The tone towards the EU is either neutral or positive, whereas that towards AUKUS is critical.

Another issue frequently referenced is the ongoing conflict in Gaza. China has expressed support for a two-state solution, condemned the occupation of Palestinian territories, and criticized US decisions at the UN.

6. Conclusions

The approach adopted by Beijing during the pandemic and the war in Ukraine led to a rejection in the West of the peaceful and non-interference approach previously espoused by previous presidents. This was replaced with a more confrontational tone, which can be attributed to the influence of nationalism and the perception of a hostile international environment following China's economic development and emergence as a global power. This has led to a desire for China to play a greater role in the international system. The Chinese government employs digital diplomacy, albeit in a somewhat distorted manner, to safeguard its interests through the utilisation of sharp power. This is largely due to the unfeasibility of employing soft power, given the pervasive dominance of the Communist Party in China. This, in turn, impedes the growth of civil society initiatives that could potentially influence foreign public opinion without being subjected to the control of those in authority.

The departure of leading diplomat Zhao Lijian in January 2023, as deputy director of the Foreign Ministry's Information Department, following the appointment of China's former ambassador to the US, Qin Gang, as foreign minister, may indicate a shift in China's strategy. Zhao assumed the role of Ministry spokesman in 2020, following a period of employment at the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan. During this tenure, he amassed a considerable following on Chinese social media platforms, particularly Twitter, for his assertive posts criticizing the United States. His departure occurred at a time when Beijing and Washington were attempting to improve relations.

Nevertheless, in consideration of the findings from the analysis of the foreign ministry's English-language Twitter accounts, it can be observed that the intensity of the attacks has not reached the levels witnessed two years ago. During that period, China echoed Russian narratives against the United States and did not hesitate to engage in name-calling and revisionism of American history in order to discredit the White House. However, the departure of Zhao Lijian does not appear to have eliminated the wolf warrior strategy, particularly in relation to matters that pose a threat to China's national sovereignty and its sphere of influence. The Chinese government is intolerant of external interference in matters it deems to be of national or geostrategic importance. These include issues pertaining to Taiwan, Hong Kong, the South China Sea, and the Xinjiang region. Consequently, its diplomatic approach remains assertive in these areas. In a similar manner to its approach during the pandemic, Beijing seeks to identify external factors, such as the US, Japan or the Philippines, as the source of challenges within its sphere of influence. This enables the instigation of Chinese nationalism when necessary.

The confrontation with the United States, whether in economic, commercial, political, or technological spheres, persists. It seems that Beijing is adopting a more flexible approach with the European Union, capitalising on the commercial opportunities it presents while simultaneously seeking to maintain ties with Latin America and Africa in order to exert influence over the Global South. Nevertheless, an analysis of tweets from January to March 2024 suggests that wolf-warrior diplomacy remains a prominent feature of Chinese politics, despite the West's apparent fatigue.

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