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China's Wolf Warrior  
Diplomacy in Asia



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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the wolf warrior style diplomacy adopted by China in recent years. This leads to a more assertive, straightforward and seemingly dominating ideology for foreign interaction— its implications for some countries of Southeast Asia, combined strategies, associations and policies. It also delves deeper into concepts like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's Wixuan and Neixuan approaches to territorial dominance and the possible consequences of such policies. It further focuses on the nuanced dimensions of analysis undertaken for its economic expansion in Asia. The paper finally concludes that such a nationalistic but starkly ambitious approach might hamper the long-term diplomatic gains for China.*

**Keywords:** Wolf Warrior, Neixuan, Assertive, Southeast Asia, Nationalistic Diplomacy

## Introduction

China's contemporary diplomatic posture can be traced back to Deng Xiaoping's strategic counsel in the 1990s to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): "Hide your strength and bide your time" (Xiaolin, D and Yitong, L. 2023). Although Deng articulated this philosophy, it was his successor, the 3rd generation CCP/PLA Leader Jiang Zemin, who formalised this phrase in its widely recognised form. For over two decades, this pragmatic doctrine served as the guiding principle for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

During this period, Beijing consistently projected itself as a "poor, developing country", focused on modernisation of the nation and development of infrastructure. It deflected any criticism on its lack of human rights and lack of democratic freedoms by asserting that any criticism of China would "hurt the feelings of millions of Chinese people". This cautious and defensive diplomatic style remained the broiler-plate norm of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs until global economic and geopolitical shifts altered China's comprehensive national power, China's self-perception and external conduct (Bhatia, N. 2024).

## Evolution of China's Foreign Policy Posture

A notable shift in China's attitude and foreign policy postures occurred during the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 wherein China got an upper hand. While the United States was consumed by domestic financial instability, China emerged as a stabilising force, particularly for the ASEAN countries, offering currency support and economic assistance. The US, meanwhile, was trying to secure its own banks and financial institutions that were prone to failing.

Following its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China had accumulated vast foreign exchange reserves (more than \$3 trillion) through aggressive and predatory mercantilist practices without opening its economy. These massive foreign exchange reserves soon became important tools of foreign policy leverage. After 2009, Chinese rhetoric in international forums evolved from humility to assertiveness—increasingly portraying China as a wealthy and powerful state.

This shift was clear during US President Barack Obama's visit to China in November 2009. Diplomatic optics had changed markedly— Chinese officials adopted a more confident posture, restricted press access during joint briefings, and avoided scrutiny over human rights. Simultaneously, during international meetings, China displayed aggressive behaviour towards President Obama and his entourage, hence, reflecting their contempt for the declining super-power US (Xiaolin, D and Yitong, L. 2023).

## **China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy in Action**

With this economic leverage behind it, from 2010 onwards, China became much assertive in its foreign policy enunciations. In July 2010, Yang Jiechi, the former Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councilor, at the ASEAN Ministers Conference in Hanoi, reportedly told Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs, George Yeo, that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact" (Lowsen, B. 2018). Xi Jinping's assumption of the CCP 5th generation leadership brought the rhetoric of China Dream and its articulation of 21st Century as the Asian (euphemism for Chinese) Century. Simultaneously, the "One Belt One Road" scheme, projecting Chinese economic power globally, initiated the era of debt-trap diplomacy for weaker countries. This terminology encapsulates more than just present interests and proclivities in Chinese diplomacy (Bhatia, N. 2024).

### **Public Confrontation and Diplomatic Aggression**

Till 2020, and sometime after COVID, China was known to be a shadow player, preferring to share less about interests and aspirations and keeping a low profile when interacting with leaders from around the globe. Over the years, China had invested very heavily into re-election of the WHO Chief Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. Using this financial influence, China was able to suppress China's role in creation of the Wuhan virus and its spread globally. This adoption of coercive and assertive diplomacy started with Zhao Lijian's assertion that the COVID virus was leaked by the US military during the military games conducted in Wuhan, China in 2019, thus giving the impression that China can go to any lengths to toss off the blame game (BBC, 2020). But in more recent times, a more dominating, assertive and over the top personality can be seen, keeping China in the throes of a very dominant foreign policy that can be seen as a 'portmanteau' of imperialist, expansionist and nationalistic interests for the country. News reports can be seen documenting behaviours of Chinese diplomats as they walk out of halls, disrespect other leaders and even use gestures that demean the very essence of a stable foreign policy, driving interests and bilateral ties globally.

A prominent example occurred in March 2021 during the US-China bilateral strategic dialogue in Alaska (BBC, 2021). Yang Jiechi, the Former Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councilor, after 2-minute opening remarks by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, responded with an unexpected 16-minute-long speech in presence of the media. He denounced the United States for its poor human rights record. Yang labeled the US as a global "champion of cyber-attacks" and declared that "many people within the United States actually have little confidence in the US democracy. This aggressive tone was followed by a similar monologue by other members of the Chinese delegation. This exchange epitomised wolf-warrior diplomacy in a full public view.

### **Explaining China's Rise and Diplomatic Transformation**

Deng Xiaoping's doctrine of Taoguang Yanghui (keeping a low profile while building strength) facilitated China's rapid modernisation and integration into the global economy as a developing economy after Mao Zedong's disruptive era of cultural revolution (Lim, J., Ito, A. and Zhang, H. 2025). It did not arouse consternation and international concern because of a camouflaged posture of humility. Economic resurgence coupled with a chokehold on the US treasury bonds allowed it to carve out a unique position of diplomatic strength for itself. Under Xi Jinping, a strict and nationalistic approach with focus on "China Dream" has helped deflect international scrutiny while consolidating domestic authority. Serial purges of rivals on corruption charges and tinkering with the post-Deng constitutional arrangements have bestowed enormous power in the hands of the paramount leader.

The One Belt One Road (OBOR) became the cornerstone of China's policy of exercising economic leverage in the international arena. Smaller countries were trapped in debt cycles with one-sided long-term contracts forcing them to barter their national sovereignty in exchange for unpaid debts. As policy experts called out this initiative and labeled it as One Debt-One Road (ODOR), China rechristened the name as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) hoping to deflect critique and public lampooning (IPDF, 2020). At the same time,

in international fora, China claimed to profess solidarity with the Global South while in the bilateral context, China displayed its diplomatic fangs and economic muscle. Post-COVID criticism and global pushback, however, appear to have reinforced Beijing's preference for an aggressive defensive posture. China assumes the self-proclaimed victimhood role for historical grievances whenever it is pushed too far internationally. This deliberate and carefully crafted dual approach allows China to frame its actions as defensive rather than expansionist, even as its belligerent conduct suggests otherwise. Control over domestic narratives, proprietary social media platforms, and algorithmic influence further strengthens China's ability to project confidence and legitimacy internationally while keeping domestic criticism at bay.

### **Asia: A Case Study in Conflict**

It would be safe to say that the 'wolf warriors' from China are activated only when the conversation is about topics that can invite severe international backlash and rebuttal, like Xinjiang, Taiwan and Hong Kong—places where a silent policy style would only frame China as the culprit. China's waixuan (external propaganda) {Xiaolin, D and Yitong, L. 2023} and neixuan (domestic propaganda) combine to send out an expression that Beijing will fiercely fight for principles at the core of its collective national interest and that is precisely what is happening in Asia as well. Expansionist claims and regional hegemony is dressed as “consistent and is guiding core Chinese interests”!

This fierce style of defending national interests is not restricted to diplomatic postures and exchanging dialogues during conferences. It has slowly mushroomed all over Asia. Southeast Asia is considered as a very fruitful and rewarding arena for China. It is also majorly affected by Chinese expansionism, both in terms of expanding economic grit and political clout. It has manifested itself in projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, which is both ambitious and highly resourced by the Chinese government. China has deployed a clever mixture of maritime conscription in the South China Sea, institutional expansion and information penetration to increase its influence in the region. The South China Sea has become a de facto Chinese private lake infringing on the EEZ of other ASEAN countries (Ninan, T.N. 2025). Over the last two decades, China has refused to negotiate a code of conduct (COC) for South China Sea in the ASEAN-China framework while demanding concession in bilateral frameworks with individual countries. The BRI, under the garb of providing infrastructural benefit to countries like Pakistan, Sri-Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives, Malaysia and Nepal has created huge economic dependencies on China. China has also become a major arms supplier to India's surrounding countries, heavily altering defence interests and gradually expanding its geopolitical footprint.

Through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and related investments (Singh, T. 2023), China has seemingly invested over US\$60 billion in Pakistan over the past decade, across power plants, highways, railways, infrastructure and the development of strategic ports such as Gwadar have only led to an increase in statistics. Building about 68% of Sri Lanka's expressways—like the 126-km Southern Expressway (Colombo ↔ Galle/Matara), China has increased loans on itself, from these developing countries, highly in need of economic protection, and isolated them from the rest of the world. The Karnaphuli Tunnel in Bangladesh is a flagship example as South Asia's first under-river road tunnel. In November 2024, China officially published a set of geographic coordinates defining 16 base points / baselines around Scarborough Shoals—doing so for a disputed maritime feature claimed by the Philippines; known in the Philippines as Bajo de Masinloc (Embassy of the Philippines, 2016), it is a triangular chain of reefs, about 125 nautical miles (232 kilometers) from Luzon, the main Philippine island. Disputed in a triangle conflict between Philippines, China and Taiwan, it has been under Beijing's de-facto control since 2012. China uses its economic clout to keep other ASEAN nations quiet in its confrontation with the Philippines. The brazenness with which China disregarded the verdict of the International Arbitration Tribunal in the Hague is reflection of China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy buttressed with its economic clout. Similarly, China encourages anti-India sentiment alive in India's near abroad using its economic aid to countries on India's periphery.

### **Economic Expansion and Strategic Dependence in Asia**

High scale investments in Southeast Asia, manifesting as infrastructural projects, economic tight handling and power plants show that the Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is not only expanding through verbal replies,

but is also creating small dependent and surveillance islands, targeted to achieve a strong presence across Asia. Examples are there in the form of China- Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), China's investment in Kyaukphyu deep seaport in Myanmar and naval base in Cambodia (Singh, A.S. 2025). China is likely to be a major investor in the consortium financing Thailand's Land Bridge project which will include four major components viz. deep-sea ports in Chumphon and Ranong; a dual-track railway; and a motorway running about 120 kilometers between the two ports. These projects come in the form of both strategic leverage and political clout for China, thus helping it go beyond the diplomatic rhetoric. Through port projects, China gains strategic access to key waterways and maritime chokepoints. In contested maritime zones (especially in the South China Sea), China is also using legal and bureaucratic tools such as land control and administrative baseline declarations to tighten grip over fruitful areas. It might as well be right to say that China is indulging in a 'dual-track diplomacy' outside the homeland, by initiating projects extended as helping hands, but are most definitely a coercive and smart way to increase dependence ratios across lands. This characterises the strong wolf-warrior approach that focuses on structural reorganisation and economic reliance.

### **Looking Forward: Strategic Costs and Adjustments**

This type of diplomacy has been spewing some confidence around the world for how China keeps its interests at the priority and how defensive their diplomats can be when it comes to protecting sovereignty. Although this style of diplomacy has been acknowledged around the world for its nationalistic approach, this might hamper Chinese interests in the long run. More recently, Xi Jinping has also stressed the importance of foreign policy to be driven as soft, friendly and open to collaboration when interacting with geopolitical interests globally. China is also keen on developing a strong social media presence and the fact that Western media sources are globally trusted more all over the world lends credence to the fact that this style needs to be tweaked to the best of Chinese interests in order to achieve their long term aim of achieving global power and appearing as a diplomacy full of camaraderie and trust.

### **Conclusion**

While paying lip service to multipolarity, what China wants is a unipolar Asia and bipolar world till China rises to the level of the sole super-power displacing the US. Recent rhetoric of Chinese ambassador to Japan talking about cutting the "dirty neck" of Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi is a true reflection of China's wolf warrior diplomacy (Woo, R. 2025). Asian nations, including the Maldives and Malaysia, are increasingly aware of the risks of overdependence on China and are actively diversifying their partnerships. Notable exceptions remain Pakistan and Bangladesh, whose strategic postures continue to align closely with Beijing while taking overtly anti-India postures. In future, this Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy will become an 'albatross' around China's neck as most of the Asian countries slowly rise from their strategic slumber. To achieve its ambition of global leadership, Beijing may need to recalibrate its diplomatic tone towards greater openness and trust-building.

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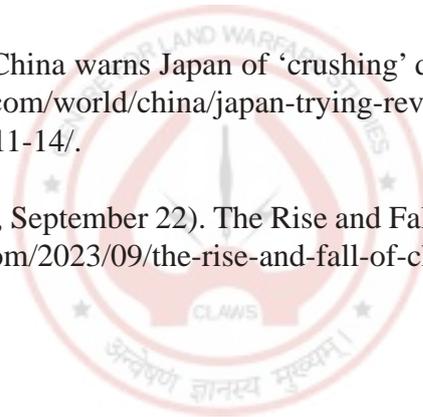
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