

Wolf Warrior Diplomacy Undermines China's International Reputation

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As the People's Republic of China has emerged as a powerful force in international affairs, its reputation has declined. No one doubts Beijing's enormous economic clout and growing military capabilities. Yet the PRC's soft power appears to be moving in reverse.

A recent [Pew Research Center report](#) found increasingly negative views of China in 19 countries. People's concerns were many but, perhaps surprisingly, human rights topped the list.

The Pew Research Center explained:

“Negative views of China remain at or near historic highs in many of the 19 countries in a new Pew Research Center survey. Unfavorable opinions of the country are related to concerns about China's policies on human rights. Across the nations surveyed, a median of 79% consider these policies a serious problem, and 47% say they are a very serious problem. Among the four issues asked about—also including China's military power, economic competition with China and China's involvement in domestic politics in each country—more people label the human rights policies as a very serious problem than say the same of the others.”

In eight countries three-quarters or more of the population held a negative view of the PRC: Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States. In another eight nations, at least half of the population held a negative view: Belgium, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom. In just three, Israel, Malaysia, and Singapore, were the unfavorability ratings under half. Only in Belgium have the numbers of negative views dropped this year.

Those polled had several concerns about the PRC. Fear of economic competition topped the list in Israel. Concern over interference in domestic politics was highest in Israel (tied with economic issues), Singapore, South Korea, and the U.S. Residents of Australia, Hungary, Japan, and Malaysia worried most about Beijing's military power. The other eleven pointed to human rights.

These concerns have spurred skepticism toward China's government and especially President Xi Jinping. Pew reported that: “Outside of Singapore and Malaysia, a majority say they have little or no confidence in him, including at least three-quarters who say this in Japan (89%), Australia (88%), South Korea (87%), Sweden (85%), the U.S. (83%), France (80%), Germany (79%),

Spain (79%), Canada (77%), the Netherlands (77%) and Belgium (75%). In most places, negative views of Xi did not significantly change over the past year and continue to hover at or near historic highs.”

Beijing should take foreign opinions into account. Of course, Chinese leaders view the latter issue as an internal matter and strict political controls as the foundation of their political system. However, in practice, the harsher repression at home, the more distant the PRC’s objectives abroad.

Facing greater international resistance, Beijing may be tempted to deploy more hard power. However, that would merely reinforce the cycle of negative opinion. For instance, Taiwan’s status has become an increasingly incendiary issue. The Pelosi visit and its aftermath likely have accelerated the potential for military confrontation over the island.

Flaunting Chinese military power has always fostered resistance rather than acquiescence by the Taiwanese and increased foreign sympathy for Taiwan’s resistance to reunification. In 1996, Taiwanese voters responded to China’s missile shots over the island by strongly backing President Lee Teng-hui for a second term. In 2020, President Tsai Ing-wen won a convincing victory after Beijing’s attacks on her backfired dramatically.

Alas, Chinese officials have not learned from experience. Lu Shaye, the PRC ambassador to France, a country in which 52 percent of people cite human rights as their most serious concern with Beijing, ostentatiously called for repression of the Taiwanese people. He declared: “Why do I say ‘re-educate’? Because the authorities of Taiwan have made an education of ‘desinicisation’ on its population, which is effectively indoctrinated and intoxicated. It must be re-educated to eliminate separatist thought and secessionist theory.”

Lu might sincerely believe that the fault lies with Taipei’s Tsai, but the Taiwanese public was notably hostile to Beijing under the last Kuomintang government, headed by President Ma Ying-jeou. And Tsai won an overwhelming reelection in 2020, swamping her more PRC-friendly opponent. Since then, even the KMT has put more distance between it and China, triggering an angry response from across the strait.

Lu, a noted practitioner of “Wolf Warrior diplomacy,” fails to understand that the Taiwanese think for themselves and see little reason to submit their future to Beijing’s control. First, with a population comparable to that of just one Chinese city, Taiwan would be submerged in a massive country with 1.4 billion people. Even if Beijing and Taipei shared basic ideological and political objectives, a Taiwanese population moving ever further away from its historic connection to the mainland likely would be skeptical of reunification.

Second, Taiwanese—especially younger generations—value Western-style liberties. That fact might offend the denizens of Zhongnanhai, but Beijing confronted similar sentiments in Hong Kong. Millions of residents did not turn out in protest against the local government because of Western indoctrination. They did so because they valued the system bequeathed by the British. And the PRC’s dismantlement of Hong Kong freedoms has eradicated any lingering Taiwanese support for a “one country, two systems” approach.

Of course, Beijing is not the only government to rely on force when its soft power has fallen short in achieving its preferred outcomes. The U.S. has proved to be the most militarily and aggressive nation since the end of the Cold War. And the results have been worse than

disappointing. Washington has found it impossible to effectively impose its will on nations as diverse as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Venezuela. It would be ironic if the PRC, which so self-consciously distinguishes its behavior from that of America, fell into the trap of mimicking failed U.S. foreign policies.

Ultimately, a policy based on conflict and reeducation would have disastrous consequences for both Taiwan and the PRC. Even a nominal victory for Beijing would be a loss, destroying what has made Taiwan so successful, creating long-term resistance on the island, and inflaming foreign hostility toward China.

The PRC's dramatic rise due to reforms after Mao Zedong's death earned the Chinese people a reputation for economic productivity and creativity. Today's threats of military action and political repression are establishing a very different reputation. If Beijing aspires to genuine international leadership, it should address today's negative perceptions by offering a positive and peaceful vision for the future.

Although hard power might still reign supreme, popular hostility in Asian and European countries is more likely to cause these nations to resist and confront China militarily. In today's emotionally inflamed climate conflict looks ever more possible, of which there would be no winners.

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