

China's Wolf Warriors Are Playing Tough but Losing Global PR Battle

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The People's Republic of China celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. In a way not seen in centuries, China can be said to have “stood up,” as Mao Zedong termed it when he announced the founding of the PRC on October 1, 1949. Beijing has gained the sort of wealth and power which once characterized the Chinese Empire.

However, China has paid for these gains with a diminished international reputation. The PRC's increasing confidence has been translated into “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy, a truculent, belligerent public posture mixed with extreme defensiveness for Chinese behavior and harsh threats in response to foreign criticism. That approach reflects a mix of nationalism and careerism, including Xi Jinping's instruction that diplomats display “fighting spirit” in their government's defense.

This approach won support from nationalistic Chinese citizens in much the same way that patriotic statements and gestures by American presidents typically gain public approval. But as a diplomatic tool, such blustering has been a bust. Other governments have been neither convinced nor cowed by the sometimes highly abusive statements and behavior.

In fact, Chinese rhetorical assaults on other nations, seeking to build up the PRC by tearing down other countries, have cost sympathy and support. The world has been reminded of the long-reviled “ugly American,” sparking antagonism, resistance, and retaliation in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere.

Even Xi, who rewarded diplomats who vigorously defended the PRC, recently suggested a retreat in tone if not substance. He called on officials to promote a “credible, lovable and respectable” image of China. No doubt, more restraint would help reduce some of the recent criticism. However, Xi and the senior CCP leadership are wrong to imagine that their problem is purely one of tone.

A new Pew Research Center survey found that the PRC dug itself into a deep public opinion hole. That is, Beijing's problem with many people in the West is their view of its behavior, and not that of its diplomats. Of the 17 nations surveyed, only two, Greece and Singapore, had unfavorable ratings of China below 50 percent. One, Spain, came between 50 and 60 percent.

Six, including Italy, the United Kingdom, and France, fell within the 60s. The U.S., Germany, and Australia were among six countries in the 70s. And two countries, Sweden and Japan, ranked in the 80s, with the latter coming in at an astounding 88 percent. The overall median stood at 69 percent.

Moreover, explained Pew: “Across advanced economies in Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific region, few people think the Chinese government respects the personal freedoms of its people. In 15 of the 17 publics surveyed by Pew Research Center, eight-in-ten or more hold this view. This sense is also at or near historic highs in nearly every place surveyed, having risen significantly in countries like Italy, South Korea, Greece, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom since 2018.”

Indeed, criticism of the PRC in this regard was overwhelming. The median was 88 percent. The laggard, Singapore, came in at 60 percent. The second lowest, with 75 percent, was Greece. Six countries ended up in the 90s, with Sweden claiming the top spot at 95 percent. The U.S. was 90 percent.

Other negative views followed naturally. There is little confidence in Xi. And a decided preference to be closely connected economically to the U.S. Foreign Policy reported how the PRC has trouble selling inexpensive (relative to its competitors) weapons abroad. Observed the Teal Group’s Richard Aboulafia:

“As China’s global stature has grown, many expected that its weapons exports would reflect its place on the world stage. Yet after decades of trying, that simply hasn’t happened.” Why? “Essentially, few want to partner up with Beijing,” he explained.

This decided skepticism, even hostility, poses a major hindrance to the ambitions of Xi and the CCP. On its own, the PRC is likely to soon possess the world’s largest economy. However, China’s vast commercial network offers vulnerability as well as influence.

Trade and investment disputes are many, and range from countries like Burma, Malaysia, and Zambia to the U.S. and Europe. Rising criticism over such issues as human rights makes it harder for even friendly governments to make commercial deals with Beijing. The recent crash of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment offers an important warning.

Moreover, anger toward the PRC enhances its greatest vulnerability: relative isolation. Not economically, of course, but in other relationships. Despite America’s often maladroit conduct around the world, it remains at the center of bilateral and multilateral alliances and a much sought-after economic, geopolitical, and military partner.

This position gives it leverage, including in the burgeoning competition between the U.S. and China. Whether the issue is Huawei, Taiwan, COVID-19, or navigational freedom, Washington is almost always able to round up some global support. The PRC must attempt to strip away U.S. friends. And rely on frenemies, more often repelled by the U.S. than attracted to Beijing, such as Russia.

Unfortunately for the PRC, telling its diplomats to be more restrained won’t redress this imbalance. The world generally welcomed China’s famed “peaceful rise” but increasingly resists Beijing’s more recent forceful, aggressive stance. Especially since that assertiveness directed against the rest of the world is backed by what is seen as mistreatment of the Chinese people at

home. Even governments which might generally oppose interference in a country's internal affairs may still feel disquiet at this combination, and thus are less likely to trust the CCP leadership.

The Chinese people have much to be proud of and indeed have stood up. However, prudence and restraint remain important virtues. It is not enough for China to moderate its Wolf Warrior diplomacy. Beijing should put itself in the position of other nations and peoples to understand how they perceive the PRC's behavior. (The West should do the same, of course.) And then reconsider practices which generate the greatest concern and opposition.

It is inevitable that societies which highly value liberty for the individual and accountability for the state will be more suspicious and fearful of governments which do not share those commitments. Especially when such a country is acting more forcefully and even belligerently abroad. If China aspires to global leadership, it should look beyond public relations. It's not enough for it to try to convince other nations to view it more positively. It should behave in ways that will convince them to do so.

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