

China's Foreign Policy and the Rise of "Wolf Warrior" Diplomacy: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract- This article examines China's contemporary foreign policy and the emergence of "wolf warrior" diplomacy through the lenses of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. While realism provides a strong explanatory framework for China's assertive behavior in an anarchic international system, liberalism and constructivism offer important complementary insights into the roles of economic interdependence, institutions, identity, and discourse. The analysis further explores how different forms of power - soft, hard, smart, and sharp - interact within China's global strategy. Ultimately, the study highlights the need for an integrated theoretical approach to fully understand the complexity of China's rise and its implications for international relations.

Index Terms- China; wolf warrior diplomacy; realism; liberalism; constructivism; great power competition; security dilemma; soft power; hard power; smart power; sharp power; global governance; diplomatic strategy; Asia-Pacific geopolitics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding China's foreign policy-and particularly the emergence the "wolf warrior" diplomacy - requires placing the phenomenon within a broader theoretical framework of international relations. Such an approach enables a more comprehensive grasp of both the structural dynamics of the international system and the institutional and ideational factors shaping state behavior. China's rise on the global stage has generated considerable scholarly interest and has been interpreted through multiple theoretical lenses within international relations.

Among these, realism arguably provides the most compelling explanation for China's contemporary behavior. By emphasizing competition among great powers and the primacy of security in an anarchic international system, realism highlights how states seek to accumulate power to safeguard their strategic interests. From this perspective, China's rise and its increasingly assertive diplomatic posture - including "wolf warrior" diplomacy - can be understood as responses to systemic pressures, particularly strategic rivalry with the United States. Moreover, China's assertiveness in its regional environment reflects a broader strategy aimed at consolidating its status as both a regional and global power.

At the same time, liberalism underscores the importance of economic interdependence, international institutions, and multilateral cooperation. China's deep integration into the global economy and its active participation in international organizations suggest a foreign policy that oscillates between competition and cooperation. Complementing these structural approaches, constructivism introduces a focus on identity, norms, and discourse, emphasizing how states define their interests and roles. In China's case, identity is closely tied to collective memory, narratives of national rejuvenation, and the aspiration to reclaim a central place in global affairs. These elements contribute to the emergence of a more direct and assertive diplomatic style.

Beyond these paradigms, China's global behavior can also be analyzed through concepts such as soft power, hard power, smart power, and sharp power, which illuminate the diverse instruments through which it projects influence. Together, these frameworks reveal a complex and evolving approach to power in contemporary international relations.

A deeper understanding of China's evolving diplomatic posture also requires attention to the domestic context in which foreign policy is formulated. The transformation of China's political economy over the past decades, coupled with the centralization of political authority and the increasing importance of nationalist narratives, has contributed to a recalibration of how the state communicates externally. Foreign policy is no longer confined to traditional diplomatic channels but is increasingly intertwined with domestic legitimacy and public opinion. In this sense, assertive diplomatic rhetoric can serve a dual purpose: signaling resolve to external audiences while reinforcing internal cohesion and confidence in the state's global role.

In parallel, the rapid expansion of the digital information environment has fundamentally altered the practice of diplomacy itself. Social media platforms and real-time communication channels have created new arenas in which states compete not only for influence but also for narrative dominance. Chinese diplomats' active engagement in these spaces reflects a broader shift toward what can be described as "networked diplomacy," where messaging is immediate, highly visible, and often confrontational. This transformation blurs the boundaries between public diplomacy, strategic communication, and information competition, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between persuasion, signaling, and deterrence in the digital sphere.

II. CHINA'S EMERGENCE THROUGH A REALIST LENS

From a realist perspective, China's diplomacy reflects the pursuit of power, national interest, and security. In an anarchic international system lacking a central authority, states are compelled to ensure their own survival. Consequently, China's assertive diplomatic behavior can be interpreted as a strategy to defend its national interests against perceived external challenges.

This framework is particularly relevant in understanding China's actions in regions such as the South China Sea and East China Sea, where territorial disputes and geopolitical competition are prominent. These actions can be seen as efforts to strengthen regional influence and secure vital economic interests, especially maritime trade routes.

Classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr argued that an inherent drive for dominance leads states into conflict, while neorealists like Kenneth Waltz shifted the focus toward the structural constraints of the international system. Waltz emphasized that states, operating under conditions of anarchy, must rely on self-help, often balancing against stronger powers rather than aligning with them.

Within this context, the concept of the security dilemma-first articulated by John H. Herz-becomes central. Efforts by one state to enhance its security can inadvertently provoke insecurity in others, leading to escalating tensions. China's expanding economic and military presence, driven in part by resource dependence and the need to secure trade routes, has triggered balancing responses from other states. "Wolf warrior" diplomacy can thus be seen as an extension of this realist logic: a rhetorical strategy aimed at signaling strength, deterring criticism, and reinforcing China's strategic position in an uncertain and competitive international system.

A further dimension of realism that helps illuminate China's behavior is the distinction between defensive and offensive realism. While defensive realism suggests that states seek sufficient power to ensure survival, offensive realism-associated with scholars such as John Mearsheimer-argues that great powers are inherently driven to maximize their relative power and pursue regional hegemony. In this light, China's expanding military capabilities, its modernization efforts, and its increasing willingness to assert territorial claims can be interpreted not merely as defensive measures, but as part of a broader ambition to reshape the regional balance of power in its favor. This perspective underscores the strategic logic behind actions that might otherwise appear excessively assertive.

Additionally, realism draws attention to the importance of perception and misperception in shaping international outcomes. Even if China frames its actions as defensive or justified, other states may interpret them as revisionist or expansionist, thereby reinforcing cycles of suspicion. This dynamic is particularly visible in the Indo-Pacific region, where competing narratives about security, sovereignty, and freedom of navigation contribute to rising tensions. From a realist standpoint, such misalignments are not anomalies but inherent features of an anarchic system, where the absence of trust compels states to prepare for worst-case scenarios.

Finally, realism emphasizes the role of strategic signaling in diplomacy. "Wolf warrior" diplomacy can thus be understood as a form of signaling intended to convey resolve, deter adversaries, and demonstrate that China is no longer willing to accept what it perceives as external interference. This type of communication, while often perceived as confrontational, serves a functional purpose within realist logic: it reduces ambiguity about intentions and reinforces deterrence. However, the risk remains that such signals may escalate tensions if interpreted as aggressive rather than defensive, highlighting the delicate balance between assertiveness and stability in great power politics.

III. LIBERALISM AND COOPERATION IN CHINA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS

In contrast to realism, liberalism emphasizes the potential for cooperation through economic interdependence, international institutions, and shared norms. Drawing on Immanuel Kant's vision of "perpetual peace," liberal theory suggests that democratic governance, trade, and institutional frameworks can mitigate conflict.

China's extensive involvement in global trade and its participation in organizations such as the United Nations, G20, APEC, and BRICS illustrate this dimension of its foreign policy. Economic interdependence-particularly with neighboring states-creates incentives to avoid conflict, as escalation would carry significant costs. Initiatives promoting regional dialogue or joint resource development can thus be interpreted as attempts to transform competition into mutually beneficial cooperation.

Another important liberal insight concerns the role of complex interdependence, which suggests that states are connected through multiple channels-economic, political, and societal-reducing the dominance of purely military considerations. In China's case, its extensive trade networks, foreign investments, and participation in global supply chains create a dense web of interconnections that shape its foreign policy choices. These linkages not only provide incentives for cooperation but also impose constraints, as disruptions to economic stability could have significant domestic repercussions. Consequently, even amid political tensions, China often seeks to preserve economic partnerships.

Liberalism also highlights the growing importance of non-state actors in international relations. Multinational corporations, international organizations, academic institutions, and even civil society groups contribute to shaping the global environment in which China operates. Chinese engagement with these actors-through initiatives such as infrastructure development, educational exchanges, and technological cooperation-reflects an awareness that influence extends beyond state-to-state interactions. This broader engagement can facilitate dialogue and mutual understanding, even when official diplomatic relations are strained.

Furthermore, liberal theory draws attention to the role of norms and rules in structuring international behavior. China's participation in multilateral frameworks demonstrates both an acceptance of certain global norms and an effort to influence their evolution. While China may challenge aspects of the existing liberal order, it does not operate entirely outside of it. Instead, its behavior suggests a selective approach, where cooperation within established institutions coexists with attempts to reshape norms in ways that better reflect its interests. This dual approach illustrates the adaptability of liberal mechanisms, even in a context of increasing geopolitical competition.

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.

IV. CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE ROLE OF POLITICAL IDENTITY

Constructivism offers a distinct perspective by focusing on the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping state behavior. As Alexander Wendt famously argued, "anarchy is what states make of it," highlighting that the international system is socially constructed through interactions among states.

From this viewpoint, China's rise is not merely a material phenomenon but also a transformation of identity and meaning within the international system. The way China perceives itself-and is perceived by others-plays a crucial role in determining whether its rise leads to conflict or cooperation. If China is recognized as a legitimate and responsible power, its integration into the international system may be smoother. Conversely, discrepancies between China's self-image and external perceptions can generate tension.

China's historical experiences, particularly the "century of humiliation," have profoundly shaped its national identity, fostering sensitivity to issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity. These narratives are reflected in its political discourse and diplomatic

behavior. “Wolf warrior” diplomacy, in this sense, is not merely a tactical communication strategy but a projection of national identity-assertive, resilient, and determined to command respect on the global stage.

From a constructivist perspective, the language and symbols used in diplomacy are not merely rhetorical tools but active components in the construction of international reality. The assertive tone associated with “wolf warrior” diplomacy contributes to redefining expectations about how China communicates and positions itself globally. By consistently projecting confidence and resistance to criticism, Chinese officials participate in shaping a new discursive environment in which such behavior becomes normalized. This process illustrates how repeated interactions can gradually transform the norms governing diplomatic conduct.

Another key constructivist insight relates to the concept of socialization. States do not operate in isolation; they are embedded in a network of relationships where norms and practices are continuously negotiated. China’s engagement with international institutions, as well as its bilateral interactions, exposes it to processes of social learning. At the same time, China actively seeks to influence these processes by promoting alternative narratives and interpretations of global governance. This reciprocal dynamic highlights that China is both shaped by and shaping the international system.

Finally, constructivism underscores the importance of narrative competition in global politics. Competing interpretations of history, legitimacy, and order play a crucial role in shaping international alignments. China’s emphasis on themes such as sovereignty, non-interference, and historical justice reflects an *محاولة* to reframe dominant narratives that have traditionally been associated with Western powers. “Wolf warrior” diplomacy can thus be seen as part of a broader effort to assert narrative agency, challenging existing representations and seeking recognition as a central and legitimate actor in the evolving international order.

Moreover, constructivism highlights the role of public diplomacy and digital platforms in shaping international perceptions. Chinese diplomats’ active presence on social media demonstrates how identity is continuously constructed and reinforced through communication. These interactions contribute to the evolution of international norms and relationships, illustrating the dynamic and intersubjective nature of global politics.

V. FORMS OF POWER IN CHINA’S CONTEMPORARY STRATEGY

China’s global influence can also be understood through the interplay of different forms of power. Soft power, as conceptualized by Joseph S. Nye, relies on attraction and legitimacy, drawing on cultural, political, and institutional appeal. China has invested significantly in cultural diplomacy, education, and international media to enhance its global image.

Hard power, by contrast, involves military and economic coercion. Between these poles lies smart power—the strategic combination of both approaches. China’s contemporary strategy exemplifies this integrated use of resources, blending economic initiatives, diplomatic engagement, and technological capabilities to maximize influence.

The concept of sharp power, introduced more recently, refers to manipulative or coercive information strategies used to shape public opinion abroad. While often associated with authoritarian states, the distinction between sharp, soft, and smart power remains contested. In China’s case, debates حول sharp power reflect broader geopolitical tensions and differing interpretations of its global activities.

A more nuanced understanding of China’s use of power requires moving beyond rigid categorizations and examining how these different forms interact in practice. Rather than deploying soft, hard, or smart power in isolation, China appears to operate through a fluid combination of these instruments, adjusting its approach depending on context and audience. Economic initiatives, for instance, may be accompanied by diplomatic messaging that emphasizes mutual benefit and shared development, while at the same time being underpinned by strategic considerations related to influence and long-term positioning. This flexibility suggests that power, in the contemporary international system, is less about choosing a single tool and more about orchestrating multiple resources in a coherent and adaptive manner.

At the same time, the effectiveness of these forms of power is closely linked to perception. Soft power, in particular, depends not only on the projection of cultural or political attractiveness but also on how these efforts are received by external audiences. In China’s case, initiatives designed to enhance its global image—such as cultural exchanges, educational programs, or international media outreach—may generate positive engagement in some regions while being viewed with skepticism in others. This variation highlights an important limitation: influence cannot be fully controlled by the actor projecting it, as it is filtered through the historical experiences, political contexts, and existing attitudes of target audiences. As a result, the same strategy may simultaneously strengthen China’s image in one context and reinforce suspicion in another.

The growing emphasis on information and communication technologies has further expanded the scope of power projection. Digital platforms, global media networks, and data-driven communication strategies have become central arenas in which states seek to shape narratives and public opinion. China’s increasing presence in these domains reflects an understanding that influence today extends beyond traditional diplomacy into the realm of information flows and perception management. In this environment, distinctions between persuasion, strategic communication, and manipulation can become blurred, contributing to ongoing debates about concepts such as sharp power. These debates, in turn, underscore the challenges of defining and measuring influence in an era where visibility and narrative control are key components of international competition.

Ultimately, the interaction between hard, soft, smart, and sharp power in China’s strategy illustrates the evolving nature of power itself. Material capabilities remain essential, but they are increasingly complemented—and sometimes constrained—by symbolic and communicative dimensions. The success of any given approach depends not only on the resources available but also on the coherence between discourse and action. Where there is alignment, China’s strategies may enhance its legitimacy and influence; where discrepancies arise, they risk undermining credibility. This dynamic reinforces the idea that power in contemporary international relations is not static, but relational and contingent, shaped as much by interpretation and interaction as by material strength.

VI. CONCLUSION

The analysis of realism, liberalism, and constructivism demonstrates that no single theoretical paradigm is sufficient to fully explain the complexity of contemporary international relations. Realism remains essential for understanding power dynamics and security competition, while liberalism sheds light on cooperation and interdependence. Constructivism, however, provides a crucial dimension by emphasizing the role of identity, norms, and perceptions.

China's foreign policy-and particularly the emergence of "wolf warrior" diplomacy-reflects this multifaceted reality. While rooted in realist concerns about power and security, it is also shaped by economic integration and deeply influenced by identity and historical narratives. In the digital age, diplomatic competition increasingly extends into the informational and discursive sphere, where states seek to shape global narratives and perceptions.

Finally, the emergence of "wolf warrior" diplomacy should be understood as part of a broader transition in the global order, characterized by shifting power balances and contestation over norms and legitimacy. As established powers and rising actors negotiate their respective positions, diplomatic practices become key instruments in shaping perceptions of authority and credibility. China's approach illustrates how rising powers may challenge not only the distribution of material power but also the discursive structures that underpin international relations. Consequently, analyzing this phenomenon provides valuable insight into the changing nature of diplomacy and the evolving dynamics of power in the twenty-first century.

In bringing these perspectives together, it becomes evident that China's contemporary diplomatic posture cannot be reduced to a single explanatory framework. Rather, it reflects a layered strategy in which material capabilities, institutional engagement, and identity construction operate simultaneously. The assertiveness associated with "wolf warrior" diplomacy emerges at the intersection of these dimensions: it is shaped by strategic competition and security concerns, moderated-though not constrained-by economic interdependence, and deeply influenced by evolving narratives of national identity and global status. This synthesis highlights that China's foreign policy is neither purely reactive nor entirely revisionist, but instead adaptive to both systemic pressures and domestic priorities.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of China's diplomatic behavior will likely depend on how these underlying dynamics evolve within a rapidly changing international environment. Intensifying great power competition, technological transformation, and the growing importance of information spaces will continue to redefine how influence is exercised and contested. In this context, "wolf warrior" diplomacy may persist as a visible expression of China's effort to assert itself, but its long-term effectiveness will depend on the extent to which it can balance assertiveness with credibility and cooperation. Ultimately, understanding this balance will be essential for assessing not only China's role in the international system, but also the broader evolution of global diplomacy in the twenty-first century.

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