

China Leadership Monitor

CLM Insights Interview:

Peter Martin, Author of *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*

China Leadership Monitor, Spring 2022 Issue 71
Tuesday, March 1, 2022

Peter Martin. *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 320 pp. ISBN-10: 0197513700

What are the key characteristics of the “culture” of China’s diplomatic corps? Zhou Enlai, the founder of China’s “civilian army,” appeared to have shaped this culture. Can you explain how the culture in the Foreign Ministry has changed since the Maoist era?

The overwhelming focus of the culture is on discipline. When the PRC was founded in 1949, its leaders faced a paradoxical challenge. This paranoid regime was obsessed with secrecy and worried about how the outside world might undermine its grip on power. And yet it needed to communicate with the outside world, to win friends, and to build influence.

To square this circle, Zhou Enlai -- the PRC’s first foreign minister and really the founding father of Chinese diplomacy -- came up with this idea that Chinese diplomats would act like the “PLA in civilian clothing” (*wenzhuang jiefangjun*). In other words, they would unfailingly display loyalty to the Communist Party, be disciplined to a fault, and would display a “fighting spirit” as they protected China’s interests.

This ethos resulted in an extraordinary degree of responsiveness to the political mood in Beijing on the part of Chinese diplomats and a bunch of pretty distinctive behaviors which were visible in 1949 and many of which still survive today. Chinese diplomats, for example, will stick incredibly closely to talking points, even if they know that they don’t resonate with foreign audiences. They move around in pairs to keep tabs on each other, observing a rule called “two people walk together” (*er ren tong xing*) and they will often elevate even the smallest of perceived slights into major international issues out of fear of looking weak or disloyal back home.

But, for all the continuities, there are significant differences too. One crucial trend has been toward professionalization. Today’s Chinese diplomats are far more proficient in foreign languages and have developed far greater subject-matter expertise than previous generations of Chinese envoys. The links to the PLA have become far weaker over time. The idea of being a “civilian army” is now an organizing ethos for Chinese diplomats, but very few of them have any significant military experience or the kinds of patronage networks in the PLA that the earliest generations of PRC diplomats enjoyed. The upshot of these shifts is that the culture of the foreign ministry has become more professional and somewhat less militaristic over time.

“Wolf warrior” seems a fitting description of the behavior of Chinese diplomats during the Maoist era. Chinese diplomats today are far better educated, more professional, and more

knowledgeable than the generals representing the People's Republic of China in the 1950s, but they do not seem to behave much differently. How do you explain this puzzle?

A lot of it comes down to the political incentives that Chinese diplomats face. The emphasis that Zhou placed on discipline has created a diplomatic corps that is incredibly responsive to changes in political direction emanating from Beijing. On the one hand, when the country's leaders have focused on winning friends for China around the world, as they did in the mid-1950s or in the 1990s, then Chinese diplomats have channeled their energies in that direction with great efficiency. When, on the other hand, there have been periods of political tension in Beijing, driven either by ideology or powerful leaders or both, then Chinese diplomats have tended to focus their energy on proving their political loyalty.

In the Xi Jinping era, this has meant that Chinese diplomats want to demonstrate that they are living up to Xi's expectation that China should take on a more central role on the world stage, showcasing the fact that China has a political and economic model worthy of emulation, and proving that they are fighting on behalf of "discourse space" for China. Oftentimes, their behavior makes little sense from the perspective of winning over international audiences, but it makes perfect sense from a domestic perspective.

It is also worth adding an important caveat. Despite very high-profile "wolf warrior"-style outbursts, the majority of Chinese diplomats in international organizations and in foreign capitals around the world today continue to conduct themselves with a high degree of professionalism. Those who have not embraced wolf-warrior tactics tend not to make headlines, but their work nevertheless continues.

What exactly is the role of the foreign ministry in China's foreign policy-making? How has this role evolved over the years? Are senior Chinese diplomats mere messengers or substantive participants in the making of Chinese foreign policy?

I guess I would describe Chinese diplomats as consequential messengers.

From the outset, the idea of modeling China's diplomatic corps after the PLA implied that the foreign ministry's role would be to implement policy decided by the party leadership rather than to set policy on its own. Both Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi constantly repeated the mantra that "diplomatic authority is limited" (*waijiao shouquan you xian*) in order to impress this fact on their subordinates.

In addition, it is important to remember that the foreign ministry is just one part of a much broader "foreign affairs system." It works alongside, and sometimes in competition with, Communist Party organizations such as the International Liaison Department and the United Front Work Department as well as other government ministries, state-owned enterprises, and, of course, the military. That has been true from the outset, but it has become a more significant limitation on the influence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs over time: as China's ties with the outside world have proliferated, more and more organizations have come to play at least some role in representing the country to the outside world.

Still, the foreign ministry retains a special place in that it is the main bureaucratic interlocutor for foreign governments and it works with foreign and domestic media more than most other Chinese government departments. That makes it one of the most important ways that the Chinese state represents itself to the outside world and a crucial indicator – however imperfect – of China’s intentions.

How do Chinese diplomats influence their political masters’ thinking about foreign affairs? Are there institutionalized (i.e., regular, formal, and substantive) channels for them to influence top leaders or is this process quite haphazard?

Naturally, the process is pretty opaque. Broadly speaking, there are two avenues of influence. First, like embassies from any other country, Chinese diplomatic missions send back cables to Beijing with assessments of political, economic, and social trends in the host nations. At times, the information has been extremely valuable to leaders in Beijing. When the PRC established its permanent mission at the United Nations in New York in 1971, the cables that the mission sent back about the situation in the United States provided extremely scarce information to the Chinese bureaucracy and became a highly sought-after commodity. This kind of diplomatic reporting has become less important over time, however, as alternative sources of information have proliferated, but it continues to be an important source of information about foreign affairs.

Second, top Chinese diplomats also play the role of trusted advisers to China’s top leaders. I think we can see Yang Jiechi’s elevation to membership on the Politburo in this light. His appointment speaks to the fact that Xi Jinping places a high priority on foreign affairs in general and on relations with the U.S. in particular (Yang is the quintessential foreign ministry “America hand”). Chinese diplomats have to compete for this advisory role alongside other powerful actors inside the Communist Party apparatus, but diplomats remain an important source of advice.

A common problem running across both of these avenues is speaking truth to power. It is a difficult thing to do in any political system, but a particular problem in China where junior officials are especially cautious about upsetting their superiors. That is one of the reasons that Party leaders also draw information from a web of think-tanks, state council advisers, reporting by state media, and, of course, the Chinese intelligence services.

Many individuals have served as foreign ministers or state councilors in charge of foreign affairs. What makes an effective foreign minister or a top professional diplomat in the Chinese system?

A few things come to mind. First off, foreign ministers have tended to be individuals who can demonstrate their responsiveness to the wishes of China’s top leaders. Zhou Enlai, of course, was famous for his ability to do this. But more recently, leaders such as Li Zhaoxing and Yang Jiechi have had reputations among colleagues as practiced practitioners of “managing up.”

Second, I would say that in the post–Cold War era, experience and expertise in either Asia or the United States seems to have been highly prized. Li Zhaoxing and Yang Jiechi both served as ambassadors in Washington before becoming foreign minister, while Tang Jiaxuan and Wang Yi both had significant experience in Japan. The fact that foreign ministers have tended to have had

such experience reflects the importance of those regions to China's leaders.

Third, from an external perspective, the most effective top Chinese diplomats have tended to be individuals with enough confidence or personal political standing to take the very tight leash that Beijing gives its envoys and stretch it just a little. Qian Qichen and Dai Bingguo both stand out to me as individuals who were able to take the leadership's priorities and present them in a way that was palatable, or at least understandable, to foreign audiences. That is no easy thing to do in the Chinese system, and I think it reflects the strong relationships each of them has had with the leaders whom they served.

What are the sources of China's "wolf warrior" diplomacy? When do you think it began? Why hasn't Beijing made significant adjustments in tone and substance of its diplomacy in spite of evidence that this approach is counter-productive?

I think the shift toward more assertive diplomacy started around 2008-9 and it has gradually been built up since then. The shift was accelerated with Xi Jinping's consolidation of power after 2012 and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. In my mind, it stems from a mixture of overconfidence and enduring insecurity, which have been exacerbated by the nature of Xi Jinping's rule.

In truth, the fact that Beijing has not recalibrated is puzzling. In the past, China was pretty effective at recalibrating after setbacks in its foreign policy. It did so in the 1970s after the Cultural Revolution and again in the 1990s in the aftermath of Tiananmen. This time around, the backlash against Beijing's policies is pretty plain to see – including to many Chinese diplomats.

The fact that the recalibration has not taken place this time is likely a result of several things. First, Xi Jinping seems to favor this kind of assertive approach and his writ runs deep and wide in Chinese politics at the moment. Second, there is, I think, a widespread perception in Beijing that American power has been substantially weakened and that China's influence is on the rise: eventually, this line of thinking goes, the world will need to adapt itself to Beijing's preferences.