

# The Man Behind China's Aggressive New Voice

How one bureaucrat, armed with just a Twitter account, remade Beijing's diplomacy for a nationalistic era.

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By Alex W. Palmer

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On the morning of Monday, Nov. 30, 2020, the Australian prime minister Scott Morrison was working from his official residence when an aide alerted him to a tweet by a Chinese foreign-ministry spokesman. Morrison was about to finish a two-week quarantine after returning from a brief diplomatic visit to Japan, and he had spent most of the morning on the phone with Australian wine exporters, discussing Chinese tariffs that had just taken effect — some as high as 212 percent — the latest in an escalating string of punitive economic measures imposed on Australia by Beijing.

But the tweet, posted by a diplomat named Zhao Lijian, represented a different kind of aggression. “Shocked by murder of Afghan civilians & prisoners by Australian soldiers,” he wrote. “We strongly condemn such acts, & call for holding them accountable.” Attached was a digital illustration of an Australian soldier restraining an Afghan child with a large Australian flag while preparing to slit the boy's throat. “Don't be afraid,” the caption read, “we are coming to bring you peace!” When the tweet appeared online that morning, there were audible gasps in Australia's Parliament House.

Earlier that month, the inspector general of the Australian Defense Force had released the results of a four-year investigation into alleged war crimes committed by elite Australian troops in Afghanistan. The investigation, which described a systemic culture of brutality and lawlessness, implicated 25 soldiers in the unlawful killing of 39 civilians and prisoners, with most of the incidents taking place in 2012. The report dominated news headlines for weeks and sparked a torturous national reckoning in Australia. To then see the country's most grievous sins — already documented by its own government — weaponized in a sarcastic tweet from a foreign official was an almost incomprehensible insult. “I don't think you could imagine a communication that could've been more perfectly shaped to be inflammatory in Australia, and so perfectly insensitive,” a former senior Australian government official said.

Zhao had already made headlines once before, for a tweet in the early days of the

pandemic in which he floated a conspiracy theory that the virus originated in the United States. “When did patient zero begin in US?” Zhao wrote. “How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!” That time, the United States State Department summoned the Chinese ambassador to protest the accusation.

But Zhao’s Afghanistan broadside was something else entirely. The tweet eclipsed the war-crimes report to become the biggest news in Australia and the turning point of a second national reckoning — this time on the subject of China. “There had never been a moment before then where the entire national conversation, from the prime minister’s courtyard to the suburban barbecue, was about China’s offensive, coercive diplomacy,” the former senior government official said. Less than two hours after Zhao’s post, Morrison was on television delivering a live address from his residence. He denounced the “truly repugnant” tweet and asked for an apology from the Chinese government. “The Chinese government should be totally ashamed of this post,” Morrison said. “It diminishes them in the world’s eyes.”

But Morrison also took care to convey that Australia was prepared to talk whenever China was ready. “I would hope that this rather awful event hopefully may lead to the type of reset where this dialogue can be restarted without condition,” Morrison said. The triangulation was an implicit acknowledgment of Australia’s vexed position — and of how closely China’s bellicose rhetoric was paired with bruising economic and political pressure.

At the time of the tweet, Australia was under a series of actual and threatened Chinese trade sanctions targeting roughly a dozen goods, including wine, beef, barley, timber, lobster and coal. The government had limited room to maneuver: The Chinese market accounts for 36 percent of Australia’s total exports and, according to one estimate, one in 13 Australian jobs. The tariffs on Australian goods had apparently been imposed in retaliation for Canberra’s recent efforts to counter China’s influence, like barring Huawei from building 5G infrastructure in the country, passing laws against foreign interference in Australian elections and civil society and calling for an independent inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus. Rory Medcalf, head of the National Security College at the Australian National University and author of “Indo-Pacific Empire,” said that Australia is something of a diplomatic proving ground for China: a liberal democracy and American ally that, despite its middle-power status, is stymieing China’s efforts to dominate the region. “China has been making an example of the country that’s setting an example for pushing back,” he said.

It would be tempting to dismiss Zhao’s tweet as a one-off provocation and Zhao himself as a bit player in this geopolitical drama. But in fact his influence has been immense. Despite being almost entirely unknown, even in China, until two years ago, Zhao has managed to rapidly and completely transform how China communicates with its allies and adversaries. His unbridled style of online rhetoric has spread throughout the

Chinese diplomatic corps, replacing the turgid mix of evasive diplomatese and abstruse Communist jargon that characterized the nation's public statements for decades.

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At first, Zhao was seemingly on his own, wielding Twitter as his personal cudgel while only a small number of other Chinese diplomats were even on the platform. As his bosses and colleagues in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs churned out bland statements about “win-win cooperation” and building a “community of shared future for mankind,” Zhao attacked detractors with an almost savage glee: Criticisms of China were “dirty lies,” and a foreign official whom Zhao disagreed with was “a person without soul and nationality.”

Zhao's timing has proved exquisite. As China's leader, Xi Jinping, forged a more muscular and confident foreign policy, Zhao was there to introduce a new, chaotic tone into Chinese diplomacy — one that proved perfectly complementary to the president's vision. Online and in the media, Zhao was called the “wolf warrior” diplomat, a moniker taken from a pair of ultranationalistic Chinese action films of the same name.

Zhao's recent ascent through the ranks mirrors China's broader awakening to its own power, a development that has been decades in the making but was rapidly accelerated by the pandemic. Today, with the pandemic slowly waning and the battle to control what comes next beginning in earnest, a newly wary world is watching as China discovers its voice — one that sounds a lot like Zhao Lijian.

**In March 2018**, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China was changed to include “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism With Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” Xi Jinping Thought was a codification of all that Xi had accomplished since his presidency began in 2013, and all that he still aimed to achieve. At home, he has consolidated power around his personal leadership, led a sweeping campaign to root out corruption (and would-be rivals) and tightened control at every level of society to ensure the primacy of the party.

Xi's impact on China's foreign policy has been just as marked. He doubled the Foreign Ministry's budget during his first term and created new offices and coordinating bodies to centralize and smooth implementation of diplomatic initiatives. Already, he has delivered more speeches on foreign affairs than any previous general secretary in Communist Party history. Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy — the idea that the international system should have “Chinese characteristics,” with more of a leadership role for the country — is now the guiding diplomatic doctrine of China.

Xi's foreign-policy vision is inextricably wedded to a sense of his own role in China's rejuvenation. "He wants to leave his name on Chinese history," Yun Sun, director of the China Program at the Stimson Center, said. "He compares himself to Mao and Deng. In his narrative, Mao made China free and Deng made it rich. What can he do? The only option he has left is to make it strong." For Xi and the rest of the party leadership, strength goes beyond traditional hard power to include dominating the information space abroad in order to "spread China's voice," a concept the party calls "discourse power."

The effort to shape and control foreign discourse on China began in earnest in the wake of the financial crisis. Brimming with newfound confidence in the superiority of the China model, the party announced major new investments to increase the global presence of state-run outlets, including starting an English-language version of the party's nationalist tabloid Global Times in April 2009. Under Xi, the focus on discourse power has only increased. By one estimate, China is spending \$10 billion a year on new ways to reach external audiences and tilt debates in China's favor. Chinese state media has embarked on an aggressive advertising campaign to bolster its presence on Western platforms like Facebook, where Global Times, CGTN and Xinhua are some of the fastest-growing media outlets, according to a report last year by Freedom House, a pro-democracy research and advocacy organization.

The surge in funding has been accompanied by a newly pugnacious message. Though there has long been a bellicose strain in Chinese government discourse, this represents a departure from longstanding norms in China's diplomatic messaging. Forging a rapprochement with China in the late 1960s and early 1970s proved tenaciously difficult, Henry Kissinger wrote, in part because "Beijing's diplomacy was so subtle and indirect that it largely went over our heads in Washington."

The subtlety was sometimes by design. As the Cold War winding down, China found itself facing enormous international backlash to the Tiananmen Square crackdown. Recognizing this as a danger to his plans for modernization, Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader of the post-Mao era, put forward a maxim to guide the country's foreign policy. "Observe calmly, secure our position, keep a cool head, hide our light and bide our time, maintain a low profile and never claim leadership," Deng said — which was eventually boiled down to simply "hide and bide."

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In an era of American hegemony, Deng's maxim served China well abroad — but it found a chillier reception at home. Thanks in part to its tradition of soft-touch diplomacy, the Foreign Ministry has typically been seen as a weakling compared to its more powerful bureaucratic brethren like the Ministry of State Security, which exercises power domestically, or the Ministry of Commerce, which oversees lucrative industries. The Foreign Ministry's mission, on the other hand — handling interactions with foreigners and presenting their points of view to Beijing — has tended to earn Chinese diplomats derision and suspicion from hawks and nationalists, who used to refer to the Foreign Ministry as the “Ministry of Treason” for its perceived compromises on issues of national security and sovereignty. Ordinary citizens, too, have made their feelings known: According to one anecdote shared among Chinese diplomats, the ministry would sometimes receive calcium pills in the mail, sent by Chinese citizens who wanted the ministry to show more backbone.

The strategy of “hide and bide” began to unravel in the first decade of the 21st century, thanks in large part to two global shocks initiated by the United States. First was the Iraq War, which showed Chinese leaders an alarming and unexpected side of American power. But the key turning point was the global financial crisis of 2008. If the war in Iraq had struck a blow against the United States' moral leadership, the financial crisis called into question its basic competence.

There had long been a dual sense of gratitude and aggrievement among Chinese officials for the lectures they would receive from Western experts on reforming China's financial system. The West's economic meltdown offered proof to Chinese leaders that their system was just as good, if not better; they felt ready to be an equal, not just a pupil. In his book “Dealing With China,” the former Treasury secretary Henry Paulson recalls a meeting in June 2008 with Wang Qishan, a senior Chinese official. “You were my teacher,” Wang said. “Look at your system, Hank. We aren't sure we should be learning from you anymore.”

In 2010, at an ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in Hanoi, the world got a first taste of the shift that was underway. After Secretary of State Hillary Clinton endorsed the bloc's concerns over freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, declaring the issue to be in the United States' “national interest,” the Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi abruptly exited the meeting. When he returned an hour later, it was to deliver a long diatribe in which he reportedly mocked his Vietnamese hosts and said, while looking directly at the foreign minister of Singapore, “China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact.” (Yang, now the Chinese Communist Party's top diplomat, gave a similarly fiery performance at the recent Alaska meeting with United States officials.)

The change was also felt in more private settings. In 2011, a European academic who was visiting Beijing met with a leading Chinese foreign-policy thinker who had long been a public advocate for cooperation with the United States. The men sat chatting in an office, until the Chinese public intellectual made an oblique reference to being snooped on and moved the conversation to a cafeteria, where there was more background noise and commotion. There, he delivered a warning: “It’s over, people like me are done,” the public intellectual said. “There isn’t anyone who believes in the cooperative vision. The debate is, Should we be assertive now or be assertive later? That’s the only debate.”

With Xi’s ascent soon thereafter, the growing rift in bilateral relations became harder to ignore. In areas where the United States had grown used to China’s cooperation or assent, it found instead a recalcitrant, if not yet hostile, rising power. What was still missing, though, was a rhetoric to match. Remarkably, it was Zhao, a relatively junior Chinese diplomat posted to Pakistan and operating mainly on Twitter, who would establish a new model for China’s interaction with the world.



Illustration by Olivier Bonhomme

**In his early** career, Zhao — who did not respond to interview requests for this article — gave few hints at his future emergence as China’s “wolf warrior” diplomat. Daniel Markey, the former South Asia head of the State Department’s policy-planning staff, first met him in 2011. In that initial interaction, Zhao was tagging along with a more senior Chinese embassy official. While Markey and the senior official discussed Pakistan and India, Zhao spoke very little, if at all. “I didn’t think much of him,” said Markey, who is

now a senior research professor at Johns Hopkins University. “He was just kind of there.”

Zhao later invited Markey to a casual lunch at Sichuan Pavilion, a popular restaurant in downtown Washington. The conversation was collegial and informal until the topic of Pakistan came up. Zhao revealed a considerable amount of anger at how the United States was interacting with the country. At the time, the United States and China were cooperating well on South Asia policy. “There was no reason for anyone to be terribly difficult,” Markey said. He left the lunch with the impression that Zhao was “kind of a hard-edged guy” but also polite and knowledgeable.

Zhao joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1996 and rose quickly through the ranks, serving at first in the Department of Asian Affairs in Beijing. In 2009, just after President Obama began his first term in office, Zhao became first secretary in the political section at the Chinese Embassy in Washington — a plum assignment for a diplomat on the rise. In Washington, Chinese diplomats had a reputation for being professional, well prepared and insular. Most lived in the same apartment buildings or in Embassy-provided housing, and spent their free time in the Bethesda area north of the city. They kept to themselves and to the local Chinese ethnic community, eating mostly at Chinese restaurants.

Within the Washington diplomatic scene, the Chinese Embassy suffered by comparison with other East Asian delegations like Taiwan and Japan, which were known for hosting dinners, pool parties and barbecues with open bars, live music and sometimes hundreds of attendees. By contrast, foreigners were almost never invited to the Chinese residences. When their diplomats socialized, it was formal: at an official lunch — always at a Chinese restaurant — or at “stodgy parties in the Embassy basement with a bad buffet,” as a former National Security Council official put it.

The same conservative attitude prevailed professionally. “One of the failings, arguably, of their Embassy is that their staff is traditionally on a pretty tight leash, with layers of internal security,” Frank Jannuzi, the former policy director for East Asian and Pacific affairs for the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said. Meetings with foreign counterparts were almost always conducted in pairs, presumably so the two Chinese diplomats could keep an eye on each other and report back anything suspicious. The incentive structure discouraged any attempt to make foreign friends. “You don’t want to be seen as the one guy who goes out and meets individually with Americans,” the former N.S.C. official said.

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The Embassy, like most, was deeply hierarchical, with the ambassador and deputy chief of mission handling most important engagements. Even as a first secretary, Zhao had a minimal public presence: He attended meetings as a “standard note taker, carrying the bag for the ambassador, and didn't make a mark,” according to the former N.S.C. official.

American foreign-policy hands who interacted with Zhao during this period recall a young diplomat tasked with internal affairs, like preparing reports and briefing superiors. When he did work directly with outsiders, though, Zhao could prove memorable. A business executive who collaborated with Zhao on a number of projects recalled him as “extremely critical, arrogant, unfriendly and just mean.” When the executive fell short of Zhao's expectations during one such collaboration, the executive was made to endure a criticism session, during which Zhao enumerated all the ways he had been disappointed. “He's just simply not a very nice person, period,” the executive said. Even some of Zhao's colleagues were said to regard him as prickly, pretentious, and unusually nationalistic.

But by the time Zhao returned to Beijing after four years in the United States, the shift in the mood and tenor of the bilateral relationship was unmistakable: The Obama administration had announced its “pivot” to Asia; Xi Jinping was president and Communist Party leader; and a downward spiral was taking hold between the two countries. If Zhao drew any conclusion from his time in Washington, it was very likely the same one dawning on so many others in both capitals: China had arrived and the era of hide and bide was over.

Perhaps the most consequential outcome of Zhao's time in the United States, however, was one that went unnoticed at the time: In May 2010, he opened an account on Twitter.

Zhao arrived in Pakistan five years later, in the fall of 2015. In the interim, the Twitter account sat almost entirely dormant. “Happy mother's day,” he wrote in his first tweet, on May 8, 2010. The account was then quiet for two years, until May 5, 2012, when Zhao tweeted “Hello” in Chinese. Two months later, he posted four seemingly random and nonsensical messages, like “@jacuib07 Mizzelle is.gd/LCCdAV.” The recipient was a grandmother in Australia with only a few dozen followers; the link redirected to a now-defunct site called bibankle.info.

Almost as soon as he arrived in Pakistan, however, Zhao began tweeting again. He had reason to believe that an outspoken Chinese diplomat would be well received in the country. Zhao had served in Pakistan before, in his first foreign assignment with the



Ministry of Foreign Affairs; it was a posting uniquely favorable to aggressive Chinese diplomacy. Pakistan was one of the first noncommunist countries to switch diplomatic recognition from the exiled government in Taiwan to the People's Republic of China, in 1950, and it placed a bet on China's rise well before other regional players. Chinese diplomats refer to Pakistan as their "iron brother" and "all-weather friend"; Pakistani politicians often describe the two countries' friendship as "higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the deepest sea in the world and sweeter than honey." For Chinese diplomats, Pakistan was a second home.

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Zhao had arrived at a moment of flux and deep uncertainty in Pakistan. The first projects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or C.P.E.C., were just getting underway. Through C.P.E.C., which began in 2013, China had committed an initial total of about \$46 billion in energy-and-infrastructure investment, which amounted to roughly 20 percent of Pakistan's gross domestic product. The partnership was a cornerstone of Xi Jinping's signature foreign-policy project, the Belt and Road Initiative, an enormous effort to build infrastructure throughout Asia and beyond in order to strengthen China's position as the hub of global commerce. The Pakistani government seemed to be announcing a new batch of Chinese investment every week, but there was no spokesperson responsible for handling C.P.E.C. issues, and the messages were sometimes unclear or incomplete; the Chinese Embassy, meanwhile, stayed mostly silent.

At the same time, the United States, disillusioned and disenchanted after a decade and a half of pouring money, resources and attention into Pakistan with little to show for it, was pulling back its presence. United States Embassy staff members, once very active in the Pakistani media and on social media, started disengaging. Into that void stepped Zhao, who became the sole voice on all things C.P.E.C., both on Twitter and in more staid official communications. "He was the face of Chinese diplomacy in Pakistan and Afghanistan," Imtiaz Gul, the executive director of the Center for Research and Security Studies in Islamabad, said. "He was in the media far more than the ambassador."

If Zhao had any trepidation about stepping into his first public-facing job — a big leap for any diplomat, especially in the Chinese system — it didn't show. He was seen frequently at dinners with prominent politicians, journalists and businesspeople. Zhao also traveled across the country in a way that was rare for diplomats posted to Pakistan. "He was everywhere," Shaukat Piracha, an anchorman at Aaj News, said. "I have not traveled as much in Pakistan as Mr. Zhao traveled."

Zhao developed a reputation for being hard working and responsive. When a problem

cropped up, like visa difficulties for Pakistani students hoping to study in China, he made sure it was addressed immediately. No detail seemed too small for him, especially when it came to C.P.E.C. “We forget the names of our cities where the roads and motorways are running through, but he would off the cuff recall the names of cities and their projects,” Gul said. The fact that Zhao came to represent tens of billions of dollars in Chinese investment only increased his standing and popularity.

At every step, Zhao benefited from the American failure in Pakistan and the lessons it left behind for the next would-be superpower. Despite the resources the United States poured into infrastructure and security, the American Embassy was in no position to garner good will in Pakistan. Attempts at positive messaging were further hamstrung by a failure to break through the din of the raucous Pakistani media scene. “We failed repeatedly and all the way through,” Markey, the former State Department official, said. The United States had spent enormous sums on personnel, media time and advertising, as well as physical projects. Nothing seemed to work, and the Chinese noticed. “They benefited from having watched us,” Markey said. “And having watched us spend tens of billions of dollars to no discernible benefit in terms of broad public sentiment.”

Zhao won praise for repeatedly highlighting Pakistan’s sacrifices in the war on terror — a point that many Pakistanis felt the United States had failed to recognize properly. “We started noticing Beijing pushing that line around 2011, 2012, when things deteriorated with the U.S.,” Wajahat S. Khan, a Pakistani journalist who covered C.P.E.C. extensively, said. “And this guy just took it to the next level.”

A Twitter presence was part of Zhao’s diplomatic persona from the beginning of his posting to Pakistan. But as Zhao became more comfortable, his pace, and especially his tone, began to change. In early July 2016, he posted a flurry of provocative tweets. First was a cartoon caricature of President Obama as Rosie the Riveter, superimposed over a grainy photo of the Capitol Building. “From I have a dream to I have drone,” Zhao captioned it. The next day, he posted a cartoon showing an American missile striking a grave labeled “Afghan Peace Talks,” saying, “Pakistan Minister of Interior Nisar: US droned Afghan peace talks to death.” Zhao was discovering the power of the platform.

**That same year,** Andrew Small, a senior trans-Atlantic fellow with the German Marshall Fund’s Asia Program, met Zhao in Pakistan. At the time, Zhao’s Twitter following was still minor, and other diplomats and observers in Pakistan weren’t sure what to make of him. Small recalls flagging something Zhao tweeted and showing it to a European official. “Are you sure he’s with the Embassy?” the official asked. “I’ve been going through his Twitter feed and all his old stuff is anti-American stuff and weird cartoons.” Small assured the official that Zhao really was a Chinese diplomat.

He had begun posting constantly, almost always in English and almost always about C.P.E.C., especially as the initiative came under scrutiny from Pakistani journalists and international observers who questioned the terms of the agreements, the cost of the projects and the environmental consequences. Though many of the posts were retweets of other users, Zhao remained just as responsive online as he was in person, answering

almost any criticism or question directed at him, no matter where it came from. Perceived C.P.E.C. naysayers were highlighted as “joke of the day,” while average Pakistanis with questions about power plants, construction timelines and special economic zones received specific and personal answers, sometimes with the hashtag #AskLijianZhao.

Zhao himself has acknowledged that what he was doing was unusual, especially by the standards of China’s diplomatic corps. “People looked at me like I was a panda, like I was an alien from Mars,” he told BuzzFeed in a 2019 interview. But it worked: While Zhao’s eager trolling of naysayers and rivals drew the most attention, he also proved himself a skilled spokesman, with a knack for winning friends and admirers. The information he provided largely was not propaganda; it was simply details about the nuts and bolts of C.P.E.C. In an environment that was full of rumors and starved for facts, that alone was revolutionary.

Zhao was especially savvy about cultivating his audience. For a time, he added “Muhammad” to his profile name, which many Pakistanis took as an indication that he was a Chinese Muslim. He also followed a huge number of civilian accounts, not just celebrities or journalists but ordinary users — the same nationalistic, development- and military-loving Pakistanis who were C.P.E.C.’s natural supporters. Though he sometimes promoted China, more often than not Zhao’s message was about Pakistan. Even the pugilistic tone he adopted was often reactive, matching the dominant tenor of Pakistan’s rowdy social media scene. “In simple terms, he was a populist,” Cyril Almeida, a former columnist at Dawn, a major Pakistani newspaper, said. “He assiduously cultivated that reputation.”

Zhao also gained fans back home on Chinese social media, where a richer and more nationalistic population was hungry for champions who could translate their country’s growing power into a forceful global presence. “The call to be more assertive and to respond to criticism was coming from China’s top leaders,” Alessandra Cappelletti, who teaches at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University and has researched Zhao’s social media activity, said. But, she added, the real impetus was bottom-up, “a consequence of an increasingly nationalistic society which was starting to feel that China’s voice needed to be heard in a more convincing way in the international arena.”

As Chinese money flowed in and projects got underway — particularly the power plants, which helped ease Pakistan’s incessant rolling blackouts — C.P.E.C. became more and more popular with the Pakistani public. No other country was willing to invest in Pakistan on the scale that China was. “There is a consensus in Pakistan that this C.P.E.C. is a fate-changer project,” Piracha said. “That C.P.E.C. will change the fate of Pakistan and to some extent it has done so.” American diplomats, meanwhile, lambasted C.P.E.C. as a debt trap, even as American aid continued to decline precipitously.

The international environment had also changed. When Zhao arrived in Pakistan, Donald Trump was still months away from winning the New Hampshire primary. Trump’s rise through the spring of 2016 and his election that November signaled that the

old rules were gone. “It’s not a coincidence that Zhao’s era traces the Trump era pretty closely,” Small said. “It made things seem possible and acceptable, thanks to the mirroring of the U.S. that goes on in the Chinese side. No one in the Chinese system would’ve been doing this on social media before Trump.” With his rhetoric toward China in particular, Trump created an opening for an equally forceful response. “If the U.S. president says China ‘rapes our country,’ they have a lot of discursive space,” said Julian Gewirtz, a former senior fellow for China studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Any lingering international good will or respect for the Obama administration quickly disappeared, especially as Trump stacked his administration with diplomats like Ric Grennell and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who took the State Department’s communications in a distinctly more aggressive direction. “Pompeo said he wanted to bring the swagger back,” Jeffrey A. Bader, a senior director for Asia on the National Security Council under Obama, said. “To me that’s just the English translation of ‘wolf warrior.’” More broadly, the Chinese leadership may simply be taking a cue from the power that it’s aiming to replace. “I think part of it is watching us and learning and modeling themselves on how we behave,” a former Department of Defense official said. “We’re pretty aggressive. Are we wolf warriors? Or is that just the way great powers handle themselves?”

In Pakistan, Zhao’s social media presence became more pugnacious. His popularity grew apace: By November 2017, he had amassed more than 200,000 followers. “People loved it, to be honest with you,” Syed Rifaat Hussain, a leading Pakistani foreign-policy thinker, said. Small recalled asking Zhao about his unusual Twitter presence and the popularity it engendered. “He was both evidently pleased that he’d taken off as a phenomenon and it was also clear that this was being done deliberately, this was approved, and it was going to keep continuing,” Small said. Zhao was discourse power in action.



Illustration by Olivier Bonhomme

**The goal of “national rejuvenation”** has been a mainstay in modern Chinese history, dating back at least to the early years of the 20th century. Under Xi, however, it has become the defining narrative of Chinese politics, the summation of all the country’s — and the party’s — efforts to return China to its past greatness. In Xi’s telling, the so-called “century of national humiliation,” from the First Opium War in 1839 until the victory of the Communist Party and the proclamation of the People’s Republic in 1949, was a shameful aberration caused by malicious foreigners and unforgivable Chinese weakness. The goal of national rejuvenation, therefore, requires China to be strong and unyielding, to prevent the country from being bullied by outsiders who seek to keep it weak, docile and divided.

When the first “Wolf Warrior” movie premiered in 2015, it spoke to this potent mix of anxiety and ambition. The film was centered around a Rambo-like hero named Leng Feng and his comrades, who battle a group of mercenaries led by a feckless ex-Navy SEAL along China’s southern border. It proved a surprise commercial success, pulling in \$80 million. But the 2017 sequel, with its record \$870 million box-office haul and immediate popular resonance, was something more — a blockbuster that captured China’s changing self-image in a way that nothing else had previously.

## Understand U.S.-China Relations

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**A tense era in U.S.-China ties.** The two powers are profoundly at odds as they jockey for influence beyond their own shores, compete in technology and maneuver for military advantages. Here's what to know about the main fronts in U.S.-China relations:



In the sequel, China is depicted as a new kind of power. Leng is sent to an unnamed African country, where Big Daddy, the villain — another American operator turned mercenary — has been hired by an ambitious warlord. Eventually, Big Daddy turns on the warlord over his demand that the mercenaries avoid killing Chinese civilians in the country. In the climactic final battle, Leng is locked in brutal hand-to-hand combat with Big Daddy, who pulls Leng close to deliver a message: “People like you will always be inferior to people like me,” he says. “Get used to it. Get [expletive] used to it.” Leng, of course, turns the tables and stabs the American to death. “That’s [expletive] history,” Leng says, just after delivering the fatal blow.

It’s perhaps not surprising that the films — which pit an ascendant China against a decaying and corrupt American empire — became metonymous with the new breed of diplomats that Xi had urged to struggle and fight in the cause of national rejuvenation. There is no shortage of battles to be won, from asserting control over Taiwan and Hong Kong to establishing dominance in the South China Sea and ending the American-led system of alliances in the Asia-Pacific region. The goals share a common theme: protection of China’s territorial integrity and the return of China to the center of the international system. Some of these ambitions are already well underway. Others, like the Belt and Road Initiative, are just beginning. The party has set a goal of completing China’s national rejuvenation by 2049, the centennial of the People’s Republic of China’s founding — a milestone that has been marked out by the Chinese leadership since at least the late 1990s.

Increasingly, the diplomats pursuing China’s vision abroad sound like Zhao — a testament to the ways in which his style of communication has already remade the Chinese foreign-policy establishment from within. In the Chinese bureaucracy as a whole, only around 4 percent of section-level cadres make it to county-level management; only 1 percent of this group are promoted beyond that. For those looking to climb the ladder in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the power of Zhao’s example is hard to miss: With his aggressive social media persona came praise, popularity and advancement to the diplomatic corps’ top echelons. “How does one get ahead in China these days?” said Richard McGregor, a senior fellow at the Lowy Institute, a Sydney-based policy-research organization. “It’s not by hiding your light and biding your time.”

The first real test of China’s road to rejuvenation — and of the wolf warriors’ ability to help the country get there — came from Hong Kong and the pro-democracy protests that swept across the city in early 2019. That year, as the protests gained momentum, a

new wave of Chinese diplomats joined Zhao on Twitter. “Right before things kicked off in Hong Kong, there was basically no diplomatic presence for China on Twitter, other than Zhao,” said Bret Schafer, the media and digital-disinformation fellow at the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a national-security advocacy group. “Now we’ve seen an explosion of accounts come online.” Beijing also began experimenting with covert information operations on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, including creating fake profiles and pages. The response to the Hong Kong protests marked China’s first major foray into so-called information warfare on Western social media.

The aggressive social media presence was not intended to mollify critics. Instead, the united front presented by China’s diplomatic corps and its propaganda and information apparatus was meant to signal that China’s interests and desires were no longer subject to negotiation or Western veto. The message for audiences both domestic and international was the same. “China won’t be pushed around, it’s no longer weak,” Jessica Chen Weiss, a professor at Cornell University and expert on Chinese nationalism, said. “The more they take flak, the more they’re going to give it back.”

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## **‘Are you sure he’s with the embassy? I’ve been going through his Twitter feed and all his old stuff is anti-American stuff and weird cartoons.’**

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In July 2019, as the protests in Hong Kong raged, Zhao engaged in his most contentious and high-profile dispute yet. After 22 United Nations ambassadors signed an open letter denouncing China’s crackdown on the Uighurs and other Muslim and minority communities, Zhao took to Twitter to criticize American hypocrisy. “If you’re in Washington, D.C., you know the white never go to the SW area, because it’s an area for the black & Latin,” he wrote. “There’s a saying ‘black in & white out’, which means that as long as a black family enters, white people will quit, & price of the apartment will fall sharply.”

Susan Rice, the former United States national security adviser and United Nations ambassador, replied: “You are a racist disgrace. And shockingly ignorant too. In normal times, you would be PNGed for this,” she tweeted, using Foggy Bottom slang for “persona non grata” — expulsion from a host country. She called on Cui Tiankai, then serving as China’s ambassador to the United States, to “do the right thing and send him home” — a public communiqué made possible by the fact that Cui had joined Twitter the previous week, part of the crop of new Chinese diplomatic accounts inspired, perhaps, by Zhao’s runaway success.

The next day, Zhao’s tweet had been deleted. Still, he still wasn’t backing down: He soon

replaced it with a map highlighting Washington's racial segregation, and he replied to Rice on Twitter. "You are such a disgrace, too," he wrote. "And shockingly ignorant, too. I am based in Islamabad. Truth hurts. I am simply telling the truth. I stayed in Washington D.C. 10 years ago. To label someone who speak the truth that you don't want to hear a racist, is disgraceful & disgusting."

Two weeks later, Zhao announced on Twitter that he was leaving Pakistan. He did not mention a new posting. It seemed that Zhao had finally gone too far — even by the new standard he helped set.

In fact, Zhao had been given a promotion, to deputy director-general of the information department at the Foreign Ministry — a posting that often serves as a steppingstone to an even larger role within the diplomatic corps. According to reporting by Reuters, when Zhao came back to Beijing, he found a group of young staff members gathered outside his office to cheer his return. Zhao took to his new role with the same gusto he had displayed in Pakistan. On Thanksgiving weekend 2019, he tweeted about what he was thankful for: the United States, "for squandering trillions of dollars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria. ..." He also suggested that, given its history of racial discrimination, police brutality and mistreatment of prisoners, the United States should look itself in the mirror before criticizing China over human rights. "But I suggest you'd better not to do it, in particular before going to bed," he said. "It will cause you nightmare."

The Chinese-language version of Global Times praised Zhao's fortitude in standing up to critics like Rice and urged others to emulate him. "Chinese media and diplomats will become more proactive in their actions, to reveal the truth to the whole world," the tabloid wrote. When the pandemic struck a few months later, that prediction proved uncannily accurate — as Zhao's attitude seemed to creep into China's broader diplomatic efforts.

**In late February 2020**, the Republican senator Roger Roth, then the president of the Wisconsin State Senate, received an email from a Hotmail address claiming affiliation with the Chinese Consul-General in Chicago. The sender, Wu Ting, said that she was responsible for "China-Wisconsin relations." Roth figured it was a joke. But when the sender followed up a couple of weeks later, he had his staff vet the email, and they confirmed its authenticity. "The Consulate General wonders if the Wisconsin State Senate could consider adopting a resolution expressing solidarity with the Chinese people in fighting the coronavirus," the email said. "It would be a great moral support to the Chinese people combating the disease. Much appreciated if you could give it a serious consideration."

A prewritten resolution was attached. "China has been transparent and quick in sharing key information of the virus with the WHO and the international community, thus creating a window of opportunity for other countries to make timely response," the draft resolution said. "And the risk of this novel coronavirus to the general public in the U.S. remains low, there is no need to overreact."



“I was mad as hell,” Roth said. Around the same time the second email arrived, the pain that the pandemic would inflict was becoming clearer, including in Wisconsin. “People in my district are losing their jobs,” Roth said. He dictated a one-word reply to his staff: “NUTS.” (The phrase came from World War II, when a German commander demanded that a surrounded American unit surrender and the defiant American general sent the same one-word answer.)

The Chicago consulate’s outreach to Roth built off a template that has been used by China around the world. In Poland, President Andrzej Duda was reportedly pressured into calling President Xi Jinping to express gratitude for medical aid — a call that was then repurposed for China’s internal propaganda. In Southeast Asia, China asked that governments thank China for dispatching medical teams to help fight the pandemic. “They do this as a standard practice in many countries,” Sun, of the Stimson Center, said. “But you don’t hear about it because the governments there just do it.”

As the pandemic accelerated beyond China’s borders, a litany of other examples came to light. In March, Xinhua, the official state news agency, called the United States’ outbreak the “Trump pandemic” and suggested that China could easily withhold exports of medical equipment, without which the United States would be engulfed “in the mighty sea of coronavirus.” When the Netherlands changed the name of its representative office in Taiwan to include the word “Taipei,” China warned that it could withhold medical aid in response. No offender was too small: The Wall Street Journal reported that when a Sri Lankan activist named Chirantha Amerasinghe criticized the Chinese government as “low class” on Twitter, the Chinese Embassy in Colombo replied, “Total death in #China #pandemic is 3344 till today, much smaller than your western ‘high class’ governments.” At the time, Amerasinghe had fewer than 30 followers.

“There’s this common theme of Western hypocrisy, Western decline, publicizing China’s model,” Peter Martin, a journalist and the author of “China’s Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy,” said. “There’s an ideology behind that. The idea is, our system has a model and it works and the world increasingly recognizes it, and the West’s system is immoral and broken and on the decline. It really is this kind of ‘sun sets on the West’ ideology behind it, and the strong belief in the efficacy of the Chinese party-state.”

The campaign was not all punitive, though; it also included incentives for good behavior. One facet of the response was “mask diplomacy”: wielding China’s near-monopoly over essential P.P.E. manufacturing as a tool for rewarding friends and punishing perceived enemies. Huawei, the embattled Chinese telecom giant, donated 800,000 face masks to the Netherlands, a few months before the country was set to hold its 5G telecom auction. More donations went to Canada and France, neither of which had decided on their 5G infrastructure. Josep Borrell, the European Union’s foreign-policy chief, warned his colleagues that there was a “global battle of narratives” underway — an assessment that gained more traction in April, when, facing pressure from Beijing, E.U. officials rewrote a report on pandemic disinformation to focus less on the actions of the Chinese

government.

Roth responded differently. On March 26, he introduced a resolution in the State Senate. The “Communist Party of China deliberately and intentionally misled the world on the Wuhan coronavirus,” the resolution stated, and Wisconsin stood “in solidarity with the Chinese people to condemn the actions” of the Communist Party. The resolution went on to list a litany of alleged misdeeds for which the party was responsible, including crackdowns on Tibetans and Muslim Uighurs, the one-child policy, organ harvesting, forced sterilization, crushing the Tiananmen protests, currency manipulation, intellectual property theft and restricted market access. Roth wasn’t sure if Wu had bothered to look up his political party, much less his policy positions, before asking him to pass the resolution. If she had, she might’ve known he was unlikely to go along with it.

But Roth had no illusions that China actually cared about him or Wisconsin. “Initially, I thought they were just coming to me,” he told me when he spoke to me last summer. “Then I realized this is standard operating procedure. They wanted us to pass it so they could run it through their national media and say, ‘Look, the U.S., Wisconsin, is praising us.’” The result was the opposite: He was working on a resolution supporting Hong Kong. “By the time we’re done, we’ll have one on Taiwan,” Roth said.

**According to data** from a 14-country survey released by the Pew Research Center in October, just weeks before Zhao’s Australia tweet, negative views of China have soared in the past year, hitting historic highs in nine of the 14 countries. The change was especially stark in countries like Australia, Sweden and the Netherlands that have been on the receiving end of China’s most bellicose diplomacy. In Australia, unfavorable views have risen 24 percentage points since 2019, the largest single-year change in the country since Pew began conducting the survey in 2008. Sixty-one percent of respondents said that China had done a bad job handling the pandemic; the most negative views came from China’s regional neighbors in Australia, Japan and South Korea. (Only the United States received a worse grade for its pandemic response.)

The findings make clear what many have already argued: The rise of “wolf warrior” diplomacy threatens to squander the opportunity presented to China by four years of erratic and self-defeating American diplomacy under Trump. “They don’t understand why the world doesn’t give them the respect they deserve,” Shivshankar Menon, the former national-security adviser of India, said. “You end up asking whether ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy isn’t a symptom of an inability to get off the back of the tide of nationalism — now that you’re on you don’t know how to get off.”

Even within China, the new tone has sparked unease, with prominent scholars and former-diplomats pushing back against the hard-liners. Zhang Feng, a prominent foreign-policy scholar, published a blog post on China’s “self-defeating” discourse. Once too abstract and difficult to understand, Zhang wrote, China’s diplomatic discourse had now swung in the other direction. “Why don’t we take the high road and compete against the U.S. at the diplomatic level using honest information?” he wrote. “To flaunt

like this, and get into a ‘spitting war’ with America while dressing it up as ‘an eye for an eye,’ is really just playing into America’s tactics and in the end hurts Chinese foreign relations and weakens China’s morals internationally.” Similarly, a People’s Liberation Army general named Dai Xu pointed out that the wolf warriors had failed to win China any friends or good will. “China has provided assistance to so many countries, benefiting them in so many ways, but at this critical moment, none of them has taken any unified action with China,” he wrote. The only thing the wolf warriors had achieved was to “knock on the door of the American Empire with great fanfare and declare: ‘I’m going to surpass you, I’m going to replace you and I will become the best in the world.’”

But China’s leadership may not care about the country’s favorability — at least with certain audiences. The 14 countries measured in the Pew survey are all advanced democracies, many of them in Europe. “There are other audiences, particularly in parts of the world that don’t feel a strong sense of allegiance to the U.S.-led order, where people love this stuff,” Gewirtz said. “Trolls are popular too.” In the post-Trump era, where trust in long-term United States support for developing countries is uncertain, sticking it to Europe and the United States may be a winning play, especially as Chinese aid and investment surge and China occupies more of the global leadership role that the West once carved out for itself.

Zhao’s tweets offer a window into the global audience that China seeks to cultivate. Just before his confrontation with Susan Rice, Zhao promoted a United Nations resolution echoing China’s position on Xinjiang. Among the signatories he highlighted were Russia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt, Algeria, the Philippines and Belarus — a broad coalition of developing countries, many of which will power future global economic growth and some of which have found themselves on the receiving end of scolding from the United States over human rights. During the recent 11-day conflict in Gaza, Zhao tweeted a cartoon image of a bald eagle dropping a missile on the territory. “See what ‘#HumanRights defender’ has brought to #Gaza people,” he wrote. With wolf-warrior diplomacy, China is positioning itself as a leader of the non-Western world — and betting that other members of the bloc are just as eager to see a world free of America’s overbearing influence.

In America and the other rich Western countries included in the Pew survey, meanwhile, the intended message may actually be landing exactly as hoped. “Even if [China’s] reputation is damaged,” Gewirtz said, “the view of China being powerful and having a louder voice and greater strength is still there.”

Australia may be a harbinger. The country remains on the receiving end of a withering campaign of both hard and soft power, ranging from propaganda and threats to broad trade sanctions. “The Chinese have engaged in economic coercion before against single industries, like Norwegian salmon or Philippine bananas,” James Curran, a professor of history at the University of Sydney, said. “Australia is taking it across a broad range of fronts simultaneously.” The country has taken steps, since the passage of the anti-foreign interference laws in 2018, to diversify its economy and reduce dependence on

China, but four decades of nearly unquestioned enthusiasm for the fruits of China's growth have left it in a precarious position. Last year, exports of goods and services to China accounted for 8 percent of Australia's total gross domestic product. Other resource-rich exporters in South America and Africa are similarly exposed, as are Asian economies and emerging markets dependent on China for supply chains, investment and infrastructure. (Australia has been spared the worst of the possible fallout because of record high prices in iron ore, the one commodity for which China is heavily dependent on Australia.)

In Australia's case, at least, the point of wolf-warrior diplomacy is, in fact, to be disliked — or, more precisely, feared. "It's possible China will have some soft-power setbacks for what they're doing," Rush Doshi, a former Brookings Institution fellow and the author of "The Long Game," a book on Chinese grand strategy, said. "But is soft power going to rule international relations or is hard power?"

In the uproar surrounding Zhao's tweet and the Australian reaction, the source of the offending image garnered little attention. It was created by a young graphic artist who goes by Wuheqilin. His first illustration, titled "A Pretender God," depicted a group of Hong Kong protesters worshipping a grotesque Statue of Liberty, which holds a gasoline bomb and a keyboard. His cartoons earned him a glowing profile in Global Times, as well as the nickname "Wolf Warrior artist."

Soon after "A Pretender God" came another piece, "Cannon Fodder," which showed a child in a Guy Fawkes mask standing in the middle of a railroad track, a slingshot raised at an oncoming train. Beside the tracks stands a group of smiling adults holding umbrellas to shield themselves from the splatter of blood that is sure to result. A woman to the child's right appears to depict Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen, while a trio of dogs with wagging tongues wear collars resembling the American flag. But perhaps the most interesting symbol is unintentional: The train itself, which appears to stand for China as it hurtles down the tracks — implacable, unyielding and seemingly unable to change course.

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