

## TARGETED RESPONSES TO CRITICS

China has begun to rein in its ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’.

Instead of sweeping criticism, it now responds to accusations with personalised objections.

By reassessing its strategy, China hopes to create a more positive image for itself.

A new pattern emerged in China’s verbal responses to public accusations aimed against it in 2021. From the spring of 2018, China had been applying so-called “wolf warrior” diplomacy, mainly expressed by Chinese spokespeople hurling aggressive attacks at critics of China. A salvo of lofty Marxist vocabulary from Chinese literature classes was used to carpet bomb opponents of the Chinese narrative. This style of diplomacy was named after a popular Chinese action movie – Wolf Warrior 2 – in which a lone Chinese soldier fights American mercenaries.

The past year saw China reassess its “wolf warrior diplomacy” and introduce measured responses. Recent opinion polls in the West have shown that China’s image has become significantly more negative over the past couple of years. Due to this trend, Chinese leadership has sensed the need to use a softer, more targeted approach.

**The Chinese leadership has sensed the need to use a softer, more targeted approach due to its image becoming significantly more negative.**

When responding to criticism now, China addresses specific people or names them in its responses. The personalised response is expected to silence the author of the criticism and show that China’s outrage has been provoked by a specific individual or group and is not directed against all foreigners.

There are several examples of such personalised condemnation from the last year aimed against targets in our region. The Chinese embassy in the Czech Republic criticised the Prague-based think tank Sinopsis, calling its analysts “so-called experts on China”. In Norway, a personal reply was sent to the editor of Aftenposten after the newspaper published a statement supporting the Hong Kong publication Apple Daily on its front page. The Swedish newspaper Jönköpings-Posten received a prompt objection to its editorial criticising China from the Chinese embassy. A Swedish journalist and a member of parliament have also received threatening letters from the Chinese embassy to their personal email addresses.

However, China does not limit itself to verbal threats and is also prepared to use force to disproportionately escalate a conflict situation. For example, China planned to demand that Denmark hand over two members of parliament for having assisted a Hong Kong democracy activist and two other individuals who had criticised China. The Danish



The current spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Zhao Lijian is one of the first Chinese diplomats who started cultivating "wolf warrior diplomacy" with Marxist exhilaration. It was decided in Beijing that Zhao Lijian, who at the time of his declarations was working the Chinese embassy in Pakistan, would serve as a great symbol for China's new foreign policy. He was subsequently transferred from Islamabad to the headquarters of the Foreign Ministry behind the Chaoyang Gate (the Gate Facing the Sun).

Source: Greg Baker / AFP

security service took the threat seriously, advising these individuals not to travel to China or China-friendly countries where local authorities could arrest and extradite them to China if requested.

The tactic of personalised responses was solidified in 2021 with unprecedented sanctions imposed by China on ten individuals and four associations in the European Union. Five of the ten people are members of the European Parliament, three are members of national parliaments, and two are experts on China.

**China is also willing to go beyond rhetoric, planning to demand the extraditions of four people from Denmark, including two members of parliament.**

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Chinese embassy in Estonia sent unsolicited copies of a propaganda publication, China Watch, to a number of personal email addresses in Estonia. The embassy has evidently been collecting the personal email addresses of Estonian citizens to use them when it deems necessary. The Mission of China to the European Union regularly sends out copies of a much more professional-looking publication with similar content.

There have been new trends in China's influence operations over the past year, but the dialling back of its aggressive and sweeping "wolf warrior diplomacy" does not indicate a weakening of its positions – it merely shows that China has reassessed its strategy. A calibrated media war now accounts for an even more significant part of China's efforts to achieve its strategic goals.