



### CHINA RETHINKS INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

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Chinese leadership has directed adjustments in the confrontational diplomatic style and media tone pursued in recent years. President Xi Jinping, during a study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee (the core policy-making group in China) called for renewed efforts to revamp China’s international image to enable the country to “expand its circle of friends”. President Xi stressed on paying “attention to a good grasp of the tone...be open, confident and humble...portray an image of a credible, lovely, respectable China”. For this President Xi directed enhancing China’s “capacity for engaging in international communication”.<sup>1</sup>

At this study session Prof. Zhang Weiwei, Director of the China Institute of Fudan University in Shanghai and English interpreter for Chinese former leader Deng Xiaoping, delivered a presentation on the subject and made policy recommendations. Following the presentation, President Xi delivered his remarks and directed government authorities and CPC organisations to improve the way China tells the “world stories about itself, and convince people the ruling party is striving for the happiness of all Chinese people”.

This study session and remarks of President Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China, came at a time when public relations battle between Chinese government, CPC and the

<sup>1</sup> “Xi Focus: Xi stresses improving China’s international communication capacity”, *Xinhua*, June 1, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-06/01/c\\_139983105.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-06/01/c_139983105.htm)

United States led Western governments and media has reached its peak. Western governments and press have portrayed China, under President Xi, markedly shifting towards authoritarianism domestically and increased assertiveness abroad. Crucially, West now believes that Xi has now consolidated power and established absolute control for personal dominance over the party, reviving memories of the Mao era.

Public relations battles between China and the West have focused on China handling of the coronavirus pandemic, human rights issues related to Xinjiang and Hongkong, situation in South China Sea and China's growing assertiveness in conduct of its foreign policy. As strategic competition between the US and China escalates rhetorical exchanges between Chinese and American spokespersons have increased and intensified. This is reflected in the antagonistic statements and aggressive tactics of Chinese diplomats and CPC spokespersons during recent years. For instance, a Chinese diplomat in Brazil criticized Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau as 'boy' and 'running dog' of the US after Ottawa imposed sanctions against China on Uyghur issue.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Chinese Ambassador to France termed a French scholar critical of China's policies a 'little thug'.<sup>3</sup> This practice has been termed as 'wolf warrior diplomacy', which Chinese diplomats see as "justified defence"<sup>4</sup> in the face of relentless attacks on Chinese government, leadership and CPC by the West.

The goal of Chinese public diplomacy in recent years has been to respond to criticism on China's core interests and sensitive issues by Western governments. This was seen as China moving away from the diplomacy style advocated by former leader Deng Xiaoping i.e., "hide your strength and bide your time". Now with new directions from President Xi to make China "more lovable" it remains to be seen if Chinese diplomatic corps will dial down on their rhetoric across the world.

It now appears that Chinese leadership has reviewed the present state of international communication and public diplomacy of China and its impact on external audiences. Beijing now wants to present its narrative in a way that is effective and acceptable to international community. For this, China would require engaging with outside world through voices which understand the western audiences and the changing world, particularly the social media realm. Though China has

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<sup>2</sup> Leyland Cecco, "Chinese diplomat accuses Trudeau of making Canada 'running dog of US'", *The Guardian*, March 29, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/29/china-canada-justin-trudeau-tensions-escalate>

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Zheng, "China's embassy in Paris attacks 'mad dogs' and defends Wolf Warriors in public row with French scholar", *South China Morning Post*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3126472/chinas-embassy-paris-attacks-mad-dogs-and-defends-wolf>

<sup>4</sup> Yew Lun Tian, "China's 'wolf warrior' diplomacy is 'justified defence', envoy says", *Reuters*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-is-justified-defence-envoy-says-2021-06-17/>

grown stronger over the years, it has yet to master the art of international communication. Economic prowess cannot be a substitute for good branding of a country.

For China the challenge is to match its voice in international discourse with its national prowess and international status. China considers itself as a civilizational state and a major power, yet its voice on international issues and in international public opinion is secondary to that of Western governments. Under President Xi, CPC had expanded China's engagement with foreign media manifold through publications in local languages and cooperation with local and regional media organisations. These efforts, however, have not been able to shield China from greater international scrutiny on issues such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

China has experienced limitations of its current approach in the way international public opinion evolved in relation to coronavirus pandemic. First, the US sought to label it as a "China virus" and held China responsible for onset of the disease. Second, despite China controlling the pandemic within China and making contributions to the international fight against the virus, China's efforts were not recognized and calls were made for an international inquiry against China to ascertain origins of COVID-19 virus. Third, as vaccines were rolled out and Chinese scientists also developed indigenous vaccines, questions were raised on the quality of Chinese vaccines. In response, China sought to contrast its handling of the pandemic with that of performance of Western governments, particularly, Trump administration.

Yet, propaganda and stigmatization continued. Now China is indicating renewed confidence in shaping a more reliable and respectable image through top-level intervention. It is likely that in implementation of directives of President Xi, CPC and Chinese government might establish new institutions to promote their work and engage more people from within China and also abroad to strengthen their communication with the international audiences.

A key aspect of China's new approach would be to bring out human aspect of China's growth and development. This would be a fresh approach by China to use "new concepts" to connect with ordinary people of other countries and also help to engage local media and personalities to tell these stories. Moreover, this direction has come at a crucial time for the CPC as, party is marking its centenary in July, 2021. Ahead of this it is an important milestone that Chinese leadership is signaling that it wants to avoid slide towards confrontation with the West.