

# China's Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy, by Dylan M.H. Loh, Stanford University Press, 2024

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Foreign ministries play a crucial role in shaping a country's behaviour on the global stage. As the primary institutions responsible for managing international relations, they engage in diplomacy and develop and implement foreign policies, representing the nation's interests abroad. Foreign ministries coordinate diplomatic efforts, negotiate treaties, and engage in dialogue with other countries, international organisations and non-state actors. They also analyse global trends and provide strategic advice to government leaders, ensuring that national policies align with international realities. An essential function of foreign ministries is to protect and promote their country's economic, security and political interests. This involves fostering bilateral and multilateral relations and managing crises, conflicts and peace-building efforts. Foreign ministries maintain direct communication channels through embassies and consulates with foreign governments and citizens, facilitating cultural exchanges and mutual understanding.

Moreover, foreign ministries are vital in shaping a country's international image and soft power. They work to enhance the nation's reputation and influence abroad by engaging in public diplomacy. This includes promoting

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cultural, educational and scientific cooperation, which can lead to more robust economic ties and geopolitical alliances. Foreign ministries are the linchpin of a nation's external engagements, crafting policies that navigate the complexities of international relations and uphold the country's global standing. Two well-researched books came out recently on the nature and functions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in China.

In his recent book *China's Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy*, Dylan Loh has comprehensively examined the evolution and assertiveness of China's foreign policy, mainly through the lens of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). The book, part of the "Studies in Asian Security" series, provides a detailed analysis of how Chinese diplomacy has transformed in recent years, particularly from 2009 to 2020, a period marked by significant geopolitical shifts. Each chapter of the book addresses different aspects of China's diplomatic practices and the implications of its rising assertiveness. The introduction sets the stage by arguing that the role of the MOFA and its diplomats is often underestimated in discussions about international relations. Loh posits that understanding the nuances of Chinese diplomacy is crucial, mainly as the country adopts a more aggressive stance in its foreign interactions.

The book is divided into thematic sections that explore the historical context of Chinese diplomacy, the institutional identity of MOFA, and the emergence of 'wolf warrior' diplomacy. This term refers to the confrontational approach adopted by some Chinese diplomats in recent years. Loh employs qualitative and quantitative methods to substantiate his claims, including interviews with diplomats and analysis of diplomatic events.

In Chapter One, 'Chinese Foreign Policy, MOFA's Role, and the "Practice Turn"', Loh provides a foundational overview of the evolution of Chinese foreign policy and the role of the MOFA within it. He begins by situating Chinese foreign policy in its historical context, tracing its development from the early years of the People's Republic of China to the present. He highlights critical shifts in policy approaches, notably the transition from Mao Zedong's revolutionary diplomacy to the more pragmatic strategies adopted during the reform era under Deng Xiaoping. The chapter examines how MOFA has evolved in response to these changes. Loh argues that MOFA's role has expanded significantly, reflecting the broader shifts in Chinese foreign policy. He discusses the institution's growing importance as China has become more engaged globally, necessitating a more sophisticated and proactive approach to diplomacy. The author introduces the concept of the 'practice turn', which refers to a shift in focus from theoretical models of foreign policy to the actual

practices and operations of diplomatic institutions. This turn emphasises the need to understand diplomacy not just as a series of policies but as a dynamic process shaped by institutional practices and the behaviour of diplomats. Loh's analysis in this chapter underscores the interplay between MOFA's internal practices and the broader foreign policy goals of the Chinese state. He explores how the institution has adapted to the changing demands of international diplomacy, noting the increasing emphasis on assertiveness and strategic communication.

Chapter Two, 'Diplomacy's Ascendancy', discusses how this shift, often associated with 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy, represents a significant departure from earlier, more reserved approaches. He examines the factors driving this change, including domestic political imperatives and China's growing global ambitions. The chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms through which this assertive diplomacy is implemented. Loh explores how the MOFA and Chinese diplomats have adopted more aggressive and confrontational tactics in their interactions with other countries. This includes a more pronounced use of public diplomacy and strategic messaging to defend China's policies and counter criticisms. Loh also considers the impact of this assertive approach on China's international relations. He notes that while it has allowed China to project power and assert its interests more effectively, it has also increased diplomatic tensions and strained relationships with other countries. The chapter delves into specific examples of how this approach has played out in practice, highlighting successes and challenges.

In chapter Three, 'The Field of Diplomacy in China', the author explores Chinese diplomacy's evolution and current state. Loh starts by outlining the historical shift from Maoist revolutionary diplomacy to Deng Xiaoping's more pragmatic approach. This sets the stage for understanding the recent assertive turn in Chinese foreign policy. Loh examines the structure and functions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), emphasising the influence of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on diplomatic decision-making. He highlights how the MOFA operates within the more extensive political system, noting the rising expectation for diplomats to defend China's interests more vocally.

Much of the chapter is dedicated to analysing the 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy, driven by domestic political needs for legitimacy and international ambitions to assert China's global status. Loh discusses how Chinese diplomats have become more confrontational and nationalistic in their rhetoric, especially on social media and international forums. The role of the media in shaping and reflecting China's diplomatic stance is also explored. Loh examines the

state media's portrayals of assertive diplomacy and the alignment with CPC propaganda goals, noting the growing public engagement with foreign policy issues. Through case studies of specific diplomatic incidents, Loh illustrates the practical application of assertive diplomacy and its repercussions. He integrates theoretical perspectives from international relations and political science to contextualise his analysis, offering insights into the motivation behind China's diplomatic strategies.

This chapter provides a detailed look into the dynamics shaping contemporary Chinese diplomacy, highlighting the interplay between domestic politics, institutional structures and international ambitions. Loh's analysis reveals the implications of China's assertive foreign policy for global affairs.

From the early 21st century, Loh argues that the ministry has evolved from a relatively passive entity to a central player in asserting China's interests on the global stage. This transformation is attributed to internal bureaucratic changes and external pressures, such as regional disputes and the need to project power in the face of Western criticism. One of the book's core arguments is that China's assertiveness is not merely a reflection of its growing military and economic power but is also deeply embedded in the practices and representations of its diplomats. Loh categorises diplomatic behaviours as either assertive or cooperative, providing empirical evidence of this duality. He meticulously documents instances of assertive behaviour, such as aggressive rhetoric and confrontational tactics, alongside cooperative efforts to foster regional stability.

Loh introduces the concept of the 'wolf warrior' diplomacy as a significant shift in China's diplomatic posture. This approach is characterised by a more aggressive and nationalistic tone, often employed by diplomats on social media (especially Twitter) and public statements. The book has a particular chapter on China's Twitter Diplomacy (Chapter Five). The author explores how this shift is both a response to international challenges and a reflection of domestic political dynamics within China, where assertiveness is increasingly seen as a marker of national strength.

In Chapter Four, 'Institutional Habitus and MOFA's Identity Effects', the author examines the interplay between the institutional culture of the MOFA and its evolving identity. The author begins by contextualising MOFA within the broader framework of Chinese diplomacy, noting how the institution's practices and norms have developed in tandem with the political directives of the CPC. Loh introduces the concept of institutional habitus, which refers to the ingrained behaviours, norms and practices that define

an institution's character. For MOFA, this habitus is deeply influenced by Chinese diplomacy's historical and political context. The author emphasises that MOFA's institutional habitus is characterised by a strong sense of duty to uphold and protect the interests and image of the Chinese state. This sense of duty is not just a function of an individual diplomat's training but is embedded in the very fabric of the institution. The chapter explores how this institutional habitus shapes the identity of Chinese diplomats. Loh argues that the professional identity of these diplomats is a product of the internal dynamics and expectations of MOFA. This identity is constructed through rigorous training, adherence to established norms and a commitment to the CPC's goals.

The institutional culture instils loyalty and discipline, ensuring diplomats act under the central government's directives. Under Xi Jinping's administration, there has been a notable shift towards a more assertive and confident diplomatic stance. Loh highlights how this shift reflects changes in MOFA's institutional habitus. Diplomats are now encouraged to adopt a bolder approach to defend China's interests and counter criticisms. This assertive stance, often called 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy, has become a key feature of MOFA's identity. It is not merely a tactical choice but an integral part of how Chinese diplomats perceive their roles and responsibilities. Loh delves into the practical implications of this assertive identity. The chapter discusses how the bold diplomatic posture has influenced interactions with foreign counterparts and the presentation of China's positions on the global stage. This approach aims to enhance China's influence and deter criticisms but also carries risks. This assertiveness can lead to diplomatic tension and alienate other countries, creating challenges for Chinese diplomacy. The author provides specific examples to illustrate the impact of the MOFA's assertive identity on international relations. These instances demonstrate how the institutional habitus shapes the actions and rhetoric of Chinese diplomats. Loh argues that this assertive stance is reinforced through continuous practice and is deeply embedded in the professional identity of MOFA's personnel.

In Chapter Five, 'China's Twitter Diplomacy', Loh explores the strategic shift in Chinese diplomacy with the foreign audience through Twitter. This chapter would be relatable to those who follow Chinese Twitter handlers on this social media platform. Loh begins by contextualising this development within the broader historical framework of Chinese foreign policy, noting the transition from the cautious and controlled communication methods of the past to the more direct and immediate engagement afforded by social media. Loh explains that Twitter has become a crucial platform for Chinese diplomats

to reach international audiences, allowing them to bypass traditional media gatekeepers. This shift aligns with the broader 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy trend. Loh emphasises that this approach is a deliberate strategy to assert China's position on global issues, defend its actions, and promote its national image. The author delves into specific examples of Chinese diplomats' tweets, highlighting the use of strong language and nationalistic rhetoric. These tweets often serve multiple purposes: they defend China's policies, criticise other countries, and propagate the Chinese government's viewpoints.

Loh argues that this aggressive stance on Twitter is about engaging with foreign audiences, rallying domestic support, and showcasing the government's firm stance on international matters. Loh examines the impact of this Twitter diplomacy on international relations. He notes that while this approach has increased China's visibility and influence on the global stage, it has also led to heightened tensions with other countries. The confrontational nature of many tweets has sometimes resulted in diplomatic spats and strained relations. However, Loh points out that this strategy has been effective in reinforcing China's narrative and countering criticisms swiftly and publicly. The chapter also discusses the reactions of foreign governments and media to China's Twitter diplomacy. Loh highlights instances where tweets from Chinese diplomats have sparked controversies and received significant media attention. These reactions illustrate both the reach and the risks of using social media as a tool for diplomacy. While some foreign governments have expressed concerns over the aggressive tone, others have engaged in similar tactics, leading to a new dynamic in international diplomatic communication. Loh situates China's Twitter diplomacy within the larger framework of its foreign policy objectives, suggesting that this approach reflects China's broader ambition to project its power and influence globally. He argues that while the assertive use of Twitter has enhanced China's ability to shape international discourse, it also poses risks of escalating conflicts and damaging diplomatic relationships.

For this research, Loh employs a robust methodology combining qualitative research, including interviews with diplomats and policy analysts and quantitative data analysis. This mixed-methods approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the complexities of Chinese diplomacy. The author also engages with existing literature on international relations, positioning his findings within broader theoretical debates about power dynamics and state behaviour.

The implications of Loh's findings are significant for scholars and practitioners of international relations. By highlighting the role of MOFA

and the emergence of assertive diplomatic practices, the book challenges conventional narratives that focus primarily on military capabilities or economic power as determinants of state behaviour. Loh's work suggests that understanding the internal dynamics of foreign ministries is essential for comprehending how states interact on the global stage.

In conclusion, Loh's *China's Rising Foreign Ministry* offers a timely and insightful analysis of the changing landscape of Chinese diplomacy. By focusing on the practices and representations of assertiveness within MOFA, Loh provides a fresh perspective into the complexities of China's foreign relations. The book is a valuable resource for anyone interested in international relations, Asian studies, or the intricacies of diplomatic practice in the 21st century. Loh's work contributes to academic discourse and is a practical guide for policymakers seeking to navigate the challenges posed by China's rising assertiveness. The combination of empirical data, theoretical insights and real-world implications makes this book a significant addition to the field of international relations. This book is for everyone concerned about international peace, global politics, regional development and not the least—diplomacy.