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Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, Regime Security, and the Volatility of China–Japan Relations

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Abstract. This article examines the continuity of China's confrontational Wolf Warrior diplomacy and recent arguments about its transition, with a focus on Sino-Japanese relations, drawing on and synthesising existing studies. It is important to examine the roots of China's confrontational diplomacy, and the domestic and strategic incentives behind it, because these reasons shape China–Japan relations, one of the most essential bilateral relationships in East Asia and beyond. This article argues that China's hardening policy toward Japan is an institutionalized mechanism driven by the security needs of an authoritarian regime. This argument is based on the domestic-international nexus, where external frictions, especially around the Taiwan issue, can be framed as security threats and used to maintain domestic legitimacy. When nationalism is mobilized, the domestic political costs of diplomatic moderation and compromise are high, which limit the party-state's flexibility in diplomacy. Japan can be instrumentalized as a convenient target for domestic securitization, while economic interdependence is subordinated to regime survival. With China's internal security needs shaping its Japan policy, the bilateral relationship remains structurally volatile, and China's domestic public continues to be the main audience for its authoritarian diplomacy.

Keywords: Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, Sino-Japanese Relations, Auhoritarianism, Regime Security.

1. Introduction

Since the late 2010s, Wolf Warrior diplomacy has been widely used to describe China's diplomatic style. It is commonly understood as a rise in more provocative and confrontational rhetoric with more frequent signals of toughness. At the same time, some scholars argue that Chinese diplomacy in recent years has sought to reduce escalation for greater stability and pragmatism, which is described as a post–Wolf Warrior period.

However, this apparent moderation does not necessarily reflect the realities of China–Japan relations. From the late 2010s through the early 2020s, bilateral ties have repeatedly experienced stabilization and friction. On the one hand, economic interdependence and senior-level communications have contributed to stability. On the other hand, a range of disputed topics continues to create tension, including historical memory, territorial and maritime frictions around the East China Sea, and above all, the Taiwan issue. As Japan has increasingly made its security

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concerns clear, the Taiwan issue has also become tightly linked to the U.S.–Japan alliance framework and is increasingly shaping the broader regional security. These structural sources of tension are not only difficult to resolve, as they involve multiple parties' interests and are fiercely contested, but they also lead to threat perceptions, a narrower space for compromise, and higher political and diplomatic costs of accommodation for both China and Japan.

In this context, it is difficult to describe China's posture toward Japan as continuing to de-escalate, especially given further developments following Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks about Taiwan and Japan's survival, with a chain of reactions from both sides. Even in periods when Beijing emphasizes the stabilization of external relations, tougher rhetoric and coercive policy instruments toward Japan re-emerge in these specific contexts, with an intensity that at times exceeds past peak Wolf Warrior moments, as seen in the Chinese consul general in Osaka, Xue Jian's aggressive remarks in response to Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks. The chain of reactions extends beyond diplomatic discourse into economic and social domains in 2025, and is likely to continue as there is no apparent signal of compromises from China or Japan.

2. Literature review

2.1. The evolution of Wolf Warrior diplomacy and shifts in China's diplomatic style

Wolf Warrior diplomacy has been a common label for China's more confrontational rhetoric and assertive external behavior since the late 2010s. This phenomenon is traced by Yuan to interacting drivers, including perceptions of a harsher external environment, rising nationalism, and tighter party leadership involvement in diplomacy [1]. Text-based analysis using materials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China shows that the wolf warrior style rose in specific periods often alongside leadership intervention in external policy behaviors and diplomatic management, while softened in the later period [2].

Yuan also argues that China has recalibrated toward a more accommodating diplomatic style as economic, geopolitical, and domestic pressures raise the costs of external friction [3]. Wolf Warrior diplomacy can also be a loosely defined label that can be explained too subjectively unless the core elements in this style are specified [4]. In China–Japan relations, historical memory and nationalism remain central for explaining why diplomatic discourse can harden again, considering the political use of negative historical narratives and the domestic value of anti-Japan rhetoric [5]. Smith and Fallon argue that China's official references to history in its external messaging have become more negative than in the past [6].

2.2. Reign policy under authoritarian rule

When external issues become a major domestic political issue, regimes can reshape threat perceptions and legitimacy narratives through propaganda and framing in such a process, and use public opinion as a resource for governance [7]. Information control by the regime goes beyond censorship and suppression as it can also strengthen claims of competence and legitimacy by shaping the interpretation of crises [8]. This is relevant to China–Japan relations because nationalist mobilization can help achieve regime goals while it can also create political risks, as over-mobilization and reduced diplomatic flexibility can influence how authoritarian leaders signal and bargain [9].

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2.3. Regime security and external policy

Many analyses on authoritarian China place regime security at the center of comprehensive national security. Regime security also has an additional impact on external policy. National humiliation narratives, which have long been institutionalized through education and commemoration, are important in supporting the ideological leadership and legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and foreign policy choices [10]. However, memory politics can also lead to the rise of domestic compromise costs and limit stabilization efforts [11]. Xu's experimental work suggests hardline rhetoric may help at home while provoking backlash abroad and therefore, increasing external costs [12]. Aoyama puts Japan–China relations within the China–Japan–US triangle, her argument indicates that Beijing's interest in maintaining stability with Japan can constrain confrontation, while in the very end, security distrust keeps the relationship in a fragile condition [13]. High-level exchanges and economic engagement can therefore provide times of partial stabilization, but persistent security concerns still limit how far improvement of the bilateral relationship can go [14].

In conclusion, instead of a fixed hardline stance in Chinese diplomacy, it is more appropriate to understand Wolf Warrior diplomacy as a toolkit that fluctuates with leadership intervention, nationalist pressure, and changing perceptions of threats. In Sino-Japanese relations, the authoritarian regime naturally produces information control and politicized historical memory, which increases the cost of compromise and makes bilateral relations more fragile.

3. Discussion

The central question, therefore, is not whether Chinese diplomacy as a whole has become more moderate in some binary sense. Rather, it is why, and under what conditions, China's policy toward Japan can become more rigid, securitized, and tend toward rapid escalation, especially in periods when Beijing needs to prioritize external stability on the global stage.

Previous literature has offered long-established frameworks for explaining China-Japan relations. There has been an emphasis on structural factors in bilateral and regional dimensions, such as territorial disputes, historical problems, and shifts in the regional balance of power. Research on Wolf Warrior diplomacy highlights factors including nationalism and public opinion, the strategic use of historical narratives, and the hardline diplomatic discourse's impact on domestic politics. Even so, these approaches do not fully explain within-case variation under the same leadership and amid the same unresolved structural conditions, that is, why friction sharply amplifies around certain issues or in certain phases, while in other issues or phases, restraint is pursued.

This study therefore approaches the problem from a different perspective: the politics of authoritarianism, and in particular, regime security. In contemporary China, external security shocks and heightened threat perceptions are often absorbed not only into the realm of foreign policy but also into the domestic political arena. In that arena, the party-state's priorities are the management of political risk, legitimacy, and social stability. The Taiwan issue is especially important in this case. It is not merely a military-strategic problem, it is a highly sensitive issue directly tied to regime legitimacy and the political and legal foundations of governance for the Chinese Communist Party. From this perspective, Japan's involvement in such issues can be understood as stimuli that may trigger domestic securitization. For example, Prime Minister Takaichi's remarks over Taiwan and Japan's survival may reduce the long-term strategic ambiguity for her own country in the first place, but it also forces a response from China as motivated to maintain regime security.

Party-state institutions may interpret, communicate, and manage external realities in ways that prioritize social control, information governance, and risk management, which thereby shape

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preferences and patterns of behavior in China's policy toward Japan.

Building on this logic, there are four key perspectives to conceptualize a domestic–international security nexus, in which perceptions of external threat are connected to foreign-policy posture through information governance and mass politics over the necessity of regime security:

First, Taiwan-related issues or other security challenges are particularly sensitive for China. They trigger and intensify Chinese perceptions of external security shocks or threats.

Second, these perceptions are brought into the domestic politics, where the party-state has the power to establish information control and shape interpretation. In this context, policy tools, including propaganda and censorship, are used to protect regime security.

Third, in this process, nationalism and historical memory work in two different ways as they are both mobilized and disciplined or restrained, which influences and narrows available policy options as well as China's diplomatic posture toward Japan.

Fourth, policy outcomes generate reflections such as potential public backlash, international reputational costs, and risks of escalation that can eventually lead to adjustment. In this case, Japan is not only an external diplomatic counterpart for China but also an object of its domestic securitization. As a result, China's Japan policy and China-Japan relations are not simply diplomatic studies but also matters of regime security for authoritarian China.

If Chinese diplomacy in a post–Wolf Warrior phase aims at and needs stabilization, why do security frictions around major issues persist in Japan–China relations, and at times even intensify? Should such dynamics be understood as continuity and legacy of Wolf Warrior diplomacy, or as a different and potentially institutionalizable pattern driven by regime-security imperatives for China's authoritarian rule?

4. Theoretical frameworks

Table 1. Four-factor model [15]

Emotions and perceptions toward Japan	Economic interests related to Japan	Emotions and perceptions toward China	Economic interests related to China
Chinese domestic politics	Chinese citizens' concerns about the international environment, security, and sovereignty	Japanese domestic politics	Japanese citizens' concerns about the international environment, security, and sovereignty

Party-state Realism Framework [16]

This framework mainly argues that it is best to understand China's foreign policy from the starting point of party-state politics, above all, regime security, rather than as the external behavior of a neutral state.

Tsang also lists four major features to explain party-state realism:

Feature 1 (party-first national interest): National interest is primarily defined in terms of the CCP's survival and monopoly rule, with regime security outranking other objectives.

Feature 2 (instrumentalism): International rules, institutions, and cooperation are treated as tools. They are options when useful and will be resisted or reshaped when constraining interests.

Feature 3 (party-centric nationalism): Nationalism is cultivated but also managed; this ties the great national rejuvenation to the CCP leadership, raising the domestic political cost for external compromise.

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Feature 4 (neoclassical realism): External power balances are still assessed for decision-making, but overconfidence and nationalist narratives can influence the result.

The two frameworks will be used in the following discussion on the two perspectives on China-Japan relations and regime security in China.

One of the key arguments of this article is that the gradual transition away from the Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is fundamentally asymmetrical and limited to a domestic political ratchet effect, a one-way domestic constraint. Existing studies frequently consider the structural pressures from trade and diplomacy could increase the cost of the aggressive diplomatic style, which results in a likely accommodation in foreign policy for Beijing. However, this linear interpretation might underestimate the domestic constraints imposed by nationalism under authoritarianism.

Once the CCP successfully mobilized intense nationalist sentiment during the Wolf Warrior period, the public was more likely to be under the impact of viewing external frictions through the existential lens of national humiliation and regime survival. Therefore, it established a new expectation for the public when it comes to the need for diplomatic resolve, and backing down means possibly facing immediate and massive domestic political costs. For example, the failure to stop the visit of Nancy Pelosi, the former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, to Taiwan in 2022, has stimulated disappointment in public, where the government has to consider such costs and instability and call rational patriotism [17]. When a regime ties its core legitimacy to the strength of uncompromising, moderation or failure could be understood as weakness by domestic nationalism.

Consequently, the post-Wolf Warrior era might be an illusion when it applies to core issues, including sovereignty, particularly in the case of Taiwan. Moderation and pragmatism are reserved for domains when nationalism is not sensitive and regime survival is not immediately affected, such as climate change diplomacy. However, when the Japanese side, such as Prime Minister Takaichi, explicitly linking security concerns with Taiwan, this means the issue bypasses traditional diplomatic channels for China and strikes directly at the nationalism and legitimacy of the CCP. Under Tsang's framework of party-state realism, the regime lacks a viable mechanism for de-escalation without fracturing the constructed image of strength. This structural rigidity could force the Wolf Warrior type of diplomacy to quickly return, and even intensify at times [16]. Therefore, this aggressiveness is not simply a failure of diplomatic moderation, but also could be a political performance necessary to immediately ensure domestic legitimacy in the face of incoming threats.

4.1. Japan as the best tool for domestic securitization

Beyond traditional historical analysis, this study argues that Japan is not only a geopolitical rival for China in the East Asian security, but also a structurally effective and ideal object for China's domestic securitization. While the United States presents a far more comprehensive structural and military threat, the escalation of discursive and policy pressure on Washington carries systemic risks for devastating confrontation. In contrast, Japan occupies a more uniquely vulnerable and emotionally charged marginal space in the Chinese political context.

Considering that historical memory makes anti-Japanese propaganda an exceptionally effective heuristic mechanism for building public loyalty, the party-state system is not simply remembering history, but it is actively curating and institutionalizing it [5]. The negative historical statecraft explains and transforms Japan's diplomatic and security actions into immediate domestic crises, which demand a strong and unifying response [6].

This indicates the aspect of the security nexus in domestic-international security. Through highly intensive information control and framed strategies, what the domestic audience receives precisely reflects what the state is willing to share over the external frictions. The example of Xue Jian's

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remarks does not necessarily mean the loss of control over Wolf Warrior Diplomacy or a failure of centralized control within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On the contrary, from the perspective of domestic politics, there is no sign of punishment or compromise, and it also gets some extent of support from public opinion back in China. Japan serves as a relatively low-risk target for signalling. In this case, aggressive remarks satisfy the domestic demand for nationalism, which has been cultivated by the state itself, without necessarily crossing the threshold into a more complicated and disastrous conflict. Therefore, Japan has been highly instrumentalized as China's Japan policy is the most convenient tool for the party-state to strengthen political cohesion during periods of external and internal insecurity.

4.2. The authoritarian regime security and the four-factor model

The four-factor model, shown in Table 1, includes domestic politics, economic interests, bilateral emotions and perceptions, and external concerns as key variables for understanding the equilibrium across two states, China and Japan [15]. Crucially, deep economic interdependence is often considered to provide structural stability by mitigating security dilemmas and helping prevent political sentiment from escalating to conflict.

However, from the perspective of authoritarian survival, the four-factor model also indicates the variables in a hierarchy. Under the party-state realism, the regime security absolutely monopolizes the factor of domestic politics in China, and factors including emotions and external concerns can be mobilized to suppress the importance of economic interests when facing heightened insecurity [16]. For democracies, loss of economic interests threatens the government's public support and electoral prospects; but for authoritarian regimes, weakness on territorial integrity or historical narratives releases pressure and becomes a threat to regime security.

The narrative surrounding the Taiwan problem is highly sensitive for the party-state, as the necessity of maintaining regime security, legitimacy, and stability always takes priority. It does not mean that economic interests are not important; rather, it is very essential as well noted by the four-factor model. However, there is a special deep need for regime survival and structural distrust, which is responsible for why close economic ties and high-level communication have repeatedly failed to achieve lasting stability in Sino-Japanese relations. The economic interdependence cannot bear the immense weight of the regime's security anxieties.

5. Conclusion

China's intensified Japan policy and the continuing confrontation in Sino-Japanese relations are not simply a transitional phase or a historical legacy of the Wolf Warrior Diplomacy. Under China's authoritarian regime, this situation has become an institutionalized feature. The CCP's reliance on the domestic-international security nexus means that bilateral relations will remain volatile. This situation is largely tied to China's internal security needs, as the domestic population is often the most crucial audience in authoritarian diplomacy.

However, with Prime Minister Takaichi's coalition, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Japan Innovation Party achieved a historical victory in the recent February 2026 general election for the House of Representatives, the strategic situation has shifted for both China and Japan. Unlike the beginning of the confrontation in 2025, when Prime Minister Takaichi's power in the lower house was constrained by the LDP holding fewer than half of the seats, the coalition's 352 seats victory provides her with a firm political base to further advance her policies. Consequently, China is now

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compelled to rethink its relationship with Japan and treat the Takaichi administration as a long-term and consolidated leadership.

Despite this change of situation, immediate compromises have not been witnessed on both sides. Instead, the ongoing events such as China's targeted export limitations on designated Japanese organizations, reflect the continuing instability of the nature of Sino-Japanese relations. The interaction between the transition of China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and Japan's newly empowered Takaichi administration presents an interesting and important perspective for future research, particularly as the broader international environments in East Asia and the Middle East continue to rapidly evolve.

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