

***China’s Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy.* By Dylan Loh. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2024. Hardcover: 225pp.**

Dylan Loh’s *China’s Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy* offers an in-depth examination of the day-to-day workings of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Rather than focusing on how foreign policies and strategies are formulated, Loh highlights how line diplomats execute foreign policy, providing a ground-level view that contrasts and complements more macro, strategic perspectives. One of Loh’s key contributions is his demystification of the Chinese foreign ministry, showcasing how officials respond to career and institutional incentives, much like diplomats elsewhere.

Loh’s focus on the foreign ministry makes it one of the few books in English that focuses on a specific arm of the Chinese government. Studies of individual government ministries are common in disciplines such as history, sociology and anthropology but rare in political science and international studies. However, Loh is one of many scholars who have adopted a “practice turn”—which focuses on the socially embedded meanings of behaviour among agents in a specific context—in international relations, drawing heavily from other fields (pp. 26–34).

A particularly notable aspect of Loh’s account is his explanation of the rise of “wolf warrior diplomacy”, the combative, assertive rhetoric that has come to characterize the Chinese foreign ministry’s interactions with the outside world. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, the foreign ministry has adopted more confrontational tactics, with diplomats and spokespersons frequently making aggressive public statements that attack those who seemingly oppose Beijing’s interests. This marks a stark contrast to the past when the ministry was criticized for being too passive and officials were sent “calcium pills” from members of the public as a metaphorical encouragement to “grow a spine”.

Loh attributes this shift to Xi, who has empowered MOFA to enact China’s more assertive foreign policy. Career incentives now reward diplomats who adopt a more combative style, with those embracing “wolf warrior” tactics advancing quickly in rank. This reflects a broader institutional culture within the ministry, where officials are highly disciplined and loyal to the ministry, eager to

implement directives from above and ensure that the ministry is an effective executor of Xi's policies.

Despite the ministry's newfound assertiveness, Loh places it within China's foreign and security apparatus. MOFA coordinates foreign policy at a working level and influences agendas on key issues such as the South China Sea, where the main actors are military and paramilitary forces, such as the China Coast Guard, Maritime Militia and PLA-Navy. MOFA's growing influence is underscored by the elevation of the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group to the Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission (CCFAC), the body that oversees the party's approach to foreign relations.

However, Loh also hints at the limits of the ministry's power. Its status within the Chinese system remains highly dependent on Xi's preferences. Just as he has elevated MOFA, he could just as easily reduce its prominence, as happened to the ministry of defence. Following several corruption scandals that came to light in 2023, its influence diminished and the national defence minister, Dong Jun, was excluded from the cabinet-level state councillor position and the Central Military Commission of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

To further strengthen his argument that the foreign ministry is now a *primus inter pares* among China's foreign policy institutions, Loh could have provided more information about how it interacts with other state and party organs. In China's Leninist party-state structure, parallel institutions such as the CCP's International Liaison Department, the United Front Work Department (UFWD) and the Ministry of State Security also play critical roles in external affairs. Sometimes, these bodies appear to operate independently of the foreign ministry. The Ministry of Public Security allegedly controls overseas police posts, while the UFWD is suspected of conducting its own influence operations abroad. At other times, MOFA has also gone beyond its regular diplomatic work to mobilize overseas Chinese communities, such as when China's Consulate-General in San Francisco reportedly helped organize mass demonstrations during the 2023 APEC Summit, which escalated into violence against anti-CCP protesters.

China's foreign ministry also interacts with various state-owned enterprises and regional governments, whose external engagements can have significant consequences. Loh could have expanded on how the ministry collaborates with CCP bodies—including the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) and the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office,

which have state and party duties, and the UFWD-controlled State Administration for Religious Affairs and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office—to shed light on the complex web of Chinese foreign policy. Indeed, Wang Yi, the current foreign minister and CCFAC office director, previously headed the TAO, which is in charge of handling relations with Taiwan.

Loh's work contains a few quirks that political scientists might debate. His claim that there are few theoretical works that examine China's rise and assertiveness (pp. 2–5) overlooks a substantial body of literature in International Relations discussing these very issues. Indeed, a cottage industry has grown around debating China's rise and its implications. Additionally, his reliance on the traditional theoretical frameworks of liberalism, constructivism and realism (pp. 14–16) could have been enriched by engaging with more mid-range theories focused on specific phenomena, moving beyond the “practice turn”.

Nonetheless, *China's Rising Foreign Ministry* provides valuable insights into the inner workings of an increasingly important global actor. It is a useful contribution to understanding China's foreign policy apparatus, although readers should remain aware that access to such institutions is often tightly controlled by the CCP, which carefully manages how they present themselves to the world—including to academics.

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