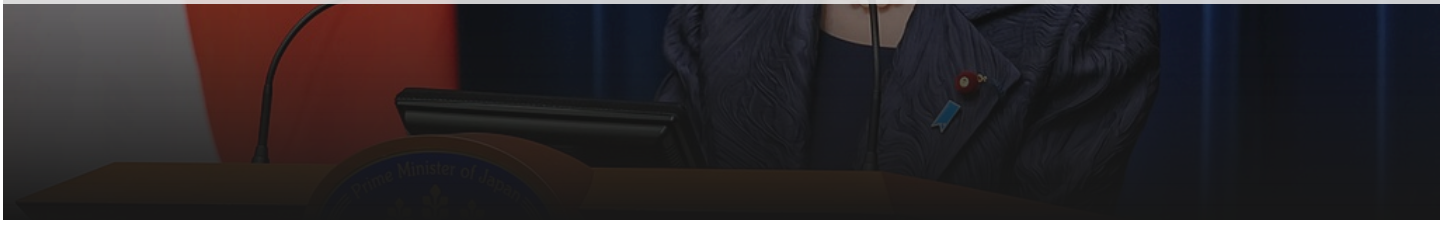

Umair Ahsan January 21st, 2026

Seeing Red: Fury as Strategy in China's Taiwan-Related Diplomacy

2 comments

Estimated reading time: 10 minutes

For observers of Chinese diplomacy, anger has become one of Beijing's most recognisable signals on the topic of Taiwan. The pattern is a familiar one: a foreign government's representative speaks about the island in a way that is considered unacceptable to China, sparking an immediate and remarkably well-coordinated backlash. Some of the responses from China's diplomats, as Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi recently discovered, could be charitably characterised as robust.

The conundrum for analysts is how to account for such indignant outbursts, which appear to demonstrate a complete loss of diplomatic decorum. Explanations usually focus on sovereignty, geopolitical tensions, and analysis of the bilateral history between China and the other parties involved. But are we witnessing real anger, or is it better described as "emotional content"? Bruce Lee's famous words might prove insightful: he used the phrase to distinguish unbridled fury from controlled, purposeful expression. Read this way, Beijing's reaction is arguably better understood as a finely calibrated diplomatic performance.

Diplomacy is one part of this picture, and when analysing China's reactions we must also consider the domestic and discursive dimensions of Beijing's foreign policy. The last of these merits closer attention and will be the focus of this article. I will contend that China's reactions are not motivated only by sovereignty claims, or a desire to reassure a patriotic public; but by the broader goal of reshaping the terms in which the entire issue of Taiwan is framed and discussed. This is consistent with Beijing's stated goal of achieving *huayuquan*, which can be translated succinctly as 'discourse power'.

Huayuquan 话语权

The term *huayuquan* has been used in various forms, albeit infrequently, since the early 2000s. In official Chinese usage, it does not refer simply to the freedom to express one's views, nor to 'soft power' as understood in the liberal sense. It is more closely tied to questions of legitimacy, authority, and moral standing within international institutions and historical narratives. To possess discourse power is to have one's framing recognised as consistent with – and indeed vital to – the proper functioning of the international order. From this perspective, *huayuquan* is as much about anchoring discourse in institutional legitimacy and civilisational authority, as it is about communication itself. The aim is not merely to speak more loudly or more persuasively, but to shape the normative environment in which this discourse is propagated and interpreted.

Xi's accession to power in 2013, together with his now famous instruction shortly thereafter to "tell China's stories well", gave renewed impetus to this desire to achieve discursive legitimacy. *Huayuquan* has thus, on the one hand, seen the successful promotion of key slogans that have placed China firmly in the international conscience: *community of a shared future for mankind*, *win-win cooperation* and other well-known phrases are among such successes.

Yet polished slogans alone do not confer discursive authority, particularly on an issue as sensitive as Taiwan. China's other notable method of establishing this discourse power, and thereby lending a grittier edge to its diplomatic language, is the confrontational tone of "wolf warrior" diplomacy. Though notably associated with the Covid-era (and prematurely assumed by some to have been a temporary phase) WWD's principles remain a core component of China's discursive repertoire, particularly in relation to Taiwan. This approach may seem to contradict the conciliatory slogans mentioned in the previous paragraph. But drawing such a conclusion overlooks not only China's pressing need to shore up domestic legitimacy, but also its desire to assert its own discourse on Taiwan as

authoritative. Wolf warrior diplomacy is often dismissed as obnoxious, discourteous and perhaps even bizarre, without necessarily considering the coercive power of the reaction itself: that is, borrowing loosely from Foucault's thoughts on the panopticon, as a means by which others internalise the limits of acceptable discourse on Taiwan. Some commentators have coined a new term for this approach: sharp power.

Whose Norm Is It Anyway?

A further illustration of China's discursive strategy on this issue is its increasing tendency to link the Taiwan question to the wider language of the post-war order. Beijing regularly invokes the UN Charter and what it calls the 'international consensus' behind the one-China principle, effectively turning a sovereignty dispute into a test of global norms. The effect is linguistic as much as it is diplomatic: China frames its position as aligned with the architecture of the international system, casting alternative formulations as departures from established norms.

Lin Jian's statement of 2 December 2025 demonstrates how explicit this move has become. His comments accused Tokyo of violating the "basic norms of international relations", invoked the victory in the anti-fascist war, and framed foreign intervention as a challenge to the post-WW2 order. What is notable here is not simply the appeal to history, but the relocation of Taiwan into a universalist narrative. Rather than treating Taiwan purely as a domestic matter, Beijing, and indeed Xi personally, increasingly position it as an issue whose resolution is inextricably linked with the maintenance of the post-war international order.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that Japan occupies a singular place in China's diplomatic imagination. Historical trauma, ongoing territorial disputes, and rivalry for regional leadership heighten Beijing's sensitivity to any Japanese commentary on Taiwan. Prior to this incident, the two countries have crossed swords rhetorically on several occasions over questions of military deployment and regional authority. Just over a decade ago the former Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom, Liu Xiaoming, likened Japan to Lord Voldemort. This latest episode, however, rather suggests that Beijing would prefer that Taiwan be the one that must not be named.

China's Discursive Challenges and Opportunities

Achieving discourse power at a global level is a formidable challenge, not least because China is operating in an international arena where English remains the dominant medium of diplomatic exchange. While the linguistic proficiency of its

English-speaking diplomats is beyond question, fluency alone is insufficient. China is attempting to project its voice in a discursive environment shaped by institutions and norms that were established largely under American leadership after the Second World War.

While this undoubtedly creates structural constraints, it also presents opportunities. Working within existing frameworks, China can selectively reshape language to influence how sensitive issues, such as Taiwan, are internationally discussed and understood. In this sense, the pursuit of *huayuquan* is not simply a matter of messaging, reputation management or soft power. Rather, it reflects an effort to embed China's preferred formulations within the normative and institutional vocabulary of international politics.

Whether this effort ultimately succeeds, and by what metric this success might be measured, is uncertain. What is clear is that China is contesting not only the future of Taiwan, but the very language through which that future can be legitimately imagined.

—

This post gives the views of the authors, and not the position of China Foresight, LSE IDEAS, nor The London School of Economics and Political Science.

About the author

Umair Ahsan

Umair Ahsan teaches at the London School of Economics and is a PhD researcher at SOAS. His research focuses on China's diplomatic narratives towards its Global South partners.

Posted In: Diplomacy | Media | Politics