

Has wolf-warrior diplomacy paid off? Examining the influence of China's distinct mediated public diplomacy via German and U.S. media coverage

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Abstract

This study unveils and compares the outcomes of distinct mediated public diplomacy strategies employed by China and Taiwan by content-analyzing their resulting news coverage in German and U.S. press. The key diplomats dispatched from China and Taiwan – who either practiced “wolf-warrior” strategy or the conventional approach – based in both Germany and the U.S. were focused as news sources. Overall, the examined coverage shows that German and U.S. media outlets used the Chinese diplomats far more frequently than the Taiwanese counterparts. The Chinese diplomats included in the news seldom resulted in positive tone or frame about topics that pertain to China. Despite only being involved in scanty coverage, the Taiwanese diplomats did not serve as sources in the news where the tone or frame is negative toward Taiwan. Implications for the varied strategies across different types of nations are provided.

Keywords: mediated public diplomacy, China, diplomatic style, news source, frame, tone

The importance of a country's image on the world stage cannot be overstated in international relations (Sonnevend 2019). It matters not only to the country's perceived global power and appeal but also to its self-identity and national pride. All countries strive to enhance their images perceived by international constituencies. Much of the work on national image improvement is executed by the diplomatic personnel via wide-ranging media ecosystems – from legacy media to social media (Garud-Patkar 2022). Therefore, *mediated* public diplomacy is often invoked as a guiding concept for such practices. Target publics who are exposed to media coverage about another country can form valenced impressions about the involved countries that may spur or move foreign policy-making. Soft power of the covered country also may be a consequence of *mediated* public diplomacy – a vital power of the nation that transcends its military or economic clout (Nye 2022).

World powers always demand and desire media attention for various reasons. China's rise in the early 21st century has been an intriguing case because it has brought a wide range of international issues, ramifications, and implications, including its interests in the media, to the

international community. Not only are its sheer size and dominant power undoubtedly newsworthy, but it also advocates distinct political system and ideals and embraces different values from the West (Yan 2018). How China exercises its influence – via its ample diplomatic and other resources – in Western news media to construct favorable or instrumental narratives for public diplomacy purposes merits scholarly attention (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2018). On the other hand, China’s archrival, Taiwan, also is motivated to increasing its media attention around the world to enhance its recognition and survival odds. Despite its much smaller size and scantier resource, Taiwan has demonstrated its alliance with democracy and liberalism and adhered to the traditional route of public diplomacy (Tsai and Tsai 2024).

As an ascending superpower, China has adopted a new public diplomacy strategy to engage with the world. Its “wolf-warrior diplomacy” – popularized by China’s former spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao Lijian – has been exercised extensively with more media and human resources (Martin 2021) since Xi Jinping took over the helm. Essentially, the new strategy advocates that China’s global clout be appropriately recognized and respected and opinion explicitly expressed (Zhao 2022). On the other hand, China’s archrival Taiwan has been struggling desperately on the international stage, aiming to gain as much recognition and support as it can garner. Taiwan’s measured while flexible approach in public diplomacy has been in stark contrast with China’s counterpart. Moreover, given the island’s miniscule leverage and resource, it would be conceptually as well as practically fruitful to examine how a small country like Taiwan vied for favorable media portrayal to improve its public diplomacy against a formidable giant.

News coverage of foreign nations can be pivotal to public opinion formation as well as foreign policy-making (Baum and Potter 2019). This facet of public diplomacy is particularly crucial for Taiwan, for whose international status has been uncertain and constantly debated (Chiang 2018). Mediated public diplomacy has been recognized as an indispensable part of international relations practice (Fullerton and Kendrick 2016) and could exert a profound impact for the involved countries in the real world (Garud-Patkar 2022). Both China and Taiwan have been keen in this type of diplomatic practice – but with markedly different approaches. Given the vast distinction between China and Taiwan, it would be rewarding to empirically investigate how their respective mediated public diplomacy panned out and relevant news coverage was directly attributed to their respective diplomats based in Germany and the U.S. – two of the most important countries in the democratic alliance. Furthermore, we are interested in unveiling how either country has been portrayed in terms of covered topics, story tone, and frame of bilateral relationship, thanks to the distinct strategies and value systems these two countries embraced and conveyed to the American and German publics.

Literature Review

Public Diplomacy

There has been an ample body of interdisciplinary literature on public diplomacy that documents, advocates, and elucidates various practices under the large umbrella of international communication and international relations (Melissen 2007). Public diplomacy stems from the concept of soft power (Nye 2004) and through a multitude of public diplomacy initiatives and programs governments implement to enhance their soft power and shape their perceived images abroad (Buhmann 2016b; Fullerton and Kendrick 2016). Even though most experts of public diplomacy maintained that the effect of any cross-national communication programs to promote a country’s image would take a long time to materialize, scarce empirical evidence exists and

only a few studies have been pursued to examine whether any of the public diplomacy efforts made by a given country actually worked in other countries (Buhmann 2016a).

Relational public diplomacy involves in-person or communication activities that allow people from different countries to interact and engage (Fullerton and Kendrick 2016). This category of practices can include scholar and language exchange programs, celebrating national holidays at embassies, and inviting locals to cultural events held by diplomatic attaches (Tam 2019). Even though relational public diplomacy efforts like exchange programs are considered helpful due to their interpersonal component, the scale of influence can be hard and expensive to expand, and the majority of international publics will likely learn about foreign countries through mediated channels rather than direct experiences. Thus, public diplomacy via the media channels has been a cost-effective means to reach key international constituents (Golan 2013).

Mediated Public Diplomacy

One of the notable features of mediated public diplomacy (MPD) is that the audience share of mediated public diplomacy programs is significantly larger than others. Golan and colleagues (2019) thus argued that diplomatic efforts should be devoted to this part of public diplomacy work more than others. All countries aim to influence how they are portrayed in the media as the result can be critical to forming and moving the opinion of target publics toward them, which can engender soft power. This endeavor is often executed by having their own channels broadcast in other languages abroad (Jirik 2016) as well as placing advertisements intended to favorably affect international audiences' perceptions (Fullerton and Kendrick 2016; Golan, Manor, and Arceneaux 2019). Additionally, countries try to depict their activities and narrate their stories in certain fashions that can be picked up by other countries' media (Golan, Manor, and Arceneaux 2019) that result in instrumental impact.

In the multifaceted steps of mediated public diplomacy, diplomats can play crucial roles in monitoring, facilitating, evaluating, and even producing content about the countries they represent. However, they may harbor different ideologies, have different understanding about the press, and practice distinct strategies that may result in different levels or types of success. That is to say, the news coverage about their countries may be related to their strategies and practices. This study is intended to compare and contrast the MPD strategies by China and by Taiwan respectively and examine the influence of their respective diplomats in the news stories pertaining to them.

Diplomats are critical news sources for international media – as Pamment (2014) keenly recognized the mediatization of diplomatic works in today's world. They play various roles to not only foster positive relationships with key constituencies but also serve as media sources to facilitate desired images and pitched narratives for their countries. Similarly, Sonnevend (2019) described diplomats' charm offensive that aims to meet the media objectives for their countries. Diplomats' distinct interpersonal styles and communication strategies with journalists and media professionals can also lead to varied coverage (Tam 2019). Therefore, diplomats are one of the most tangible agents who pursue mediated public diplomacy – and should be examined. Unfortunately, empirical work on their media performance has been scarce and this study is intended to fill the void.

China's style of MPD

Before the era of Deng Xiaoping, China was isolated and lacked active international engagements (Vogel 2011). It became more confident due to its rapid economic development since Deng and recognized political clout on the world stage (Forges and Xu 2001). In the wake of the Xi era, the country's international stance has been bolder and forthright, abandoning the

long-adopted strategy of “peaceful rise” (Men 2003). Meantime, the wolf warrior style of China’s diplomacy has been advocated and taken shape thanks to increasing nationalism inside China (Sullivan and Wang 2023; Huang 2022). Despite without a formal definition from the Chinese government, wolf-warrior public diplomacy, as Jost (2024) indicated, is embodied in acerbic, sarcastic, and confrontational tone in official, formal statements. Mattingly and Sundquist (2023) also echoed, saying that wolf-warrior style tends to employ harsh language to criticize international figures and foreign governments. As a result, public refutation and utmost critique of other countries’ perspectives and actions are often carried out by Chinese diplomats and officials. The mediated confrontation is a recurrent phenomenon because China bolsters its public diplomacy efforts while other countries’ knowledge of human rights abuses in China has increased (Kinzelbach 2019).

China approaches public diplomacy from a domestic cultural standpoint and these efforts seem mostly unsuccessful, even within its own country (Creemers 2015). China also approaches soft power from a top-down, state-focused perspective, plus its strictly confined social media ecosystem, overlooking the critical, relation-based aspects of involved publics (Morante and Wu 2023) and the relevant contextual elements of soft power (Creemers 2015). Above all, the mediated narrative and rhetoric within and about China tends to be remarkably nationalistic (Guo and Qin 2025; Rawnsley 2020). While China tries to engage in public diplomacy strategies, it simultaneously aims to increase the power of the ruling party and economic dominance worldwide. This approach undermines any softer activities, reducing their credibility and producing an impression that any public diplomacy activities are simply means to an end (Rawnsley 2020). While China views public diplomacy as mainly goal-driven, Western countries may see it more as a way to build mutual relationships. In other words, China sees public diplomacy as a way to get its message across rather than a genuine exchange with others (Hartig 2016).

The key audience of Chinese public diplomacy are foreign publics in general, but more specifically the opinion leaders that can be critical to their concerned issues. China has used similar public diplomacy tools as most countries, but China’s approach also differs. For example, its pin-pong diplomacy during the Cold War as well as panda diplomacy which involved lending pandas to zoos in countries that China aims to build or maintain good relationships with are unique (Okafor, Tan, and Khalid 2021). Another special aspect of China’s program is that the Chinese nationals living abroad or foreign nationals with Chinese heritage can also be targets of Chinese public diplomacy efforts (Hartig 2016).

Within the media domain, China believes whoever controls the global media landscape controls the discourse. Since the U.S. media used to play a dominant role in the world’s news ecosystem (Wu 2019), its interpretation of China may have impacted how the world views China (Hartig 2016). Therefore, China has invested heavily to improve its own media operation worldwide and to improve the narratives about China (Madrid-Morales 2021). However, the Chinese approach seems to have focused more on increasing the amount of communication channels and output and less on their persuasion effect. Therefore, China’s endeavors have been perceived mainly as propaganda outlets and less as instruments of public diplomacy (Hartig 2016).

As with China’s public diplomacy efforts in general, its own media is perceived as less credible abroad since it is state-owned, and international audiences are widely aware of the political landscape in China (Rawnsley 2015). China believes that the international media shape people’s perceptions of China and its agencies are expected to explain themselves and correct

misperceptions about China for the media (Rawnsley 2015). Therefore, Chinese representatives have given interviews and published opinion pieces in foreign media to vehemently disseminate their messages (d'Hooghe 2014).

Taiwan's MPD

With scarce recognition and resources, Taiwan has trodden prudently on the world stage for its survival (Schreer and Tan 2019). In accordance with the value system of its main protector, the U.S., Taiwan has embraced and practiced democracy, acted as a good global citizen, and emphasized peace and multinational cooperation in its publicized messages. It also has pursued a traditional mediated public diplomacy program although its diplomatic activity is extremely restricted by the world powers, both internally and externally (Rawnsley 2014). Taiwan can practice traditional diplomacy in only a handful of countries with which it has official diplomatic relationships and para-diplomatic relations in the rest of the world's countries with which it does not have official diplomatic relationship (Pajtinka 2017). Both the U.S. and Germany fall into the latter category as they have established official relationships with the People's Republic of China and do not recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state. However, both Germany and the U.S., like many others around the world, have an engaging, steady relationship with Taiwan. In these countries, Taiwan does not have official embassies, but has representative offices instead (Pajtinka 2017).

Taiwan has to adapt its public diplomacy programs based on its ambiguous international status and ever-changing diplomatic situation in many nations. For example, in the U.S., Taiwan quietly keeps up contacts with U.S. think tanks, hosts international scholars and students, and lobbies U.S. civic organizations and lawmakers. Taiwan involves international NGOs and constituents via its unofficial diplomacy due to its lack of formal recognition. Taiwan also tends to highlight that it has a democratic government, its own financial system and defense force, and shares values with its democratic allies, which helps legitimize its goal to remain independent from China (Sun and Wu 2023).

Despite the insurmountable challenges and hurdles in every aspect of diplomacy, Taiwan has been nimble in pursuing MPD to elevate its visibility, favorability, and soft power (Rawnsley 2017). Taiwan included social media platforms in its "digital diplomacy" program (Nanda 2023) to get more involved in cause-based organizations that do not require state status for participation. Another example of Taiwan's MPD practices is its promotion of the island as an attractive tourist destination, which has resulted in positive outcomes (Hanh 2018).

Sullivan and Lee (2018) examined how Taiwan has been covered in the U.S. for 20 years. They found that Taiwan tends to be covered in relation to geopolitical issues, structured by Sino-U.S. relationship. Potential cross-Taiwan strait conflicts and military analyses of the Asia-Pacific region are also frequent topics. Hence, Taiwan tends to be mainly referenced in combination with China, the U.S., or both countries together, rather than being covered on its own account. Because Taiwan is often covered in this context, Taiwan's messages for international publics via the media often need to adapt and take on the non-official routes. Taiwan's *de facto* independence is often deemed a source for conflict, which significantly stymies Taiwan's MDP efforts (Sullivan and Lee 2018).

The majority of the existing scholarship on MDP has focused on the U.S. – how various countries and international events are covered by U.S. media and subsequently perceived by Americans (Manheim 1994) – and almost exclusively English-language news content (Wu 2020). European media and non-English news outputs are a void in public diplomacy studies.

Cross-national comparison can shed new light on how news media in liberal democracies cover dramatically different entities for their readers. By including news outlets from both Germany and the U.S. (and two languages) in the study, we hope to gain more insight by the type of more inclusive and systematic comparison.

Based on the relevant literature reviewed above, we formed five major research questions to guide our examinations:

1. What are the topics in the German and U.S. press coverage that used the Chinese and Taiwanese diplomats during the Xi period?
2. Which of the two groups – Chinese or Taiwanese diplomats – has been used as news sources more often in the overall news coverage – and between the German and U.S. press?
3. How has the relevant news coverage that included Chinese and Taiwanese diplomats varied in tones in the German and U.S. press?
4. Between the Chinese and Taiwanese diplomats, which group has been used as sources more often in positive or negative frames for either China and Taiwan in the German and U.S. press?
5. Are there overall differences between the German and U.S. press coverage regarding China and Taiwan that used Chinese and Taiwanese diplomats?

Methods

Mainstream newspapers from Germany and the U.S. were selected to analyze its news content that used the diplomats dispatched by China and Taiwan in either country as sources during the Xi period (2013-23). The chosen time-frame is meaningful because China changed its role in the international arena by pursuing “wolf-warrior diplomacy.” The U.S. papers included in the study are the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and *TIME* magazine; and German counterparts include *BILD*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Handelsblatt*, and *Der Spiegel*. These newspapers were chosen due to their largest circulations in their respective country (Statista 2025a, 2025b) and also based on their national prestige and traditional impact in national and international affairs. For the above reasons, the *New York Post*, one of the top five highly circulated newspapers in the U.S., was not chosen. In addition to the newspapers, one influential newsmagazine from each country was chosen in the study sample. *Der Spiegel* is one significant German-language magazine whose coverage in public and international affairs has been significant; likewise, *TIME* is highly influential the U.S.

The news coverage yielded from these news outlets was thoroughly searched with all of the names of the Chinese ambassadors and Taiwanese representatives based in either country in the stories during the first ten years of the Xi presidency, i.e., from March 2013 to March 2023.¹ The retrieval method is that as long as any of the names of ambassadors and representatives (in Taiwan’s case) appear in the text of the story during the time period, the story was selected for coding. The news stories that met the above search terms were all retrieved from Nexis (N = 475), a commercial information database. The following table reports the number of the retrieved news stories from each of the media outlets from Germany and the U.S.

News outlets included in the study

News outlet	<i>n</i>
U.S.	

<i>New York Times</i>	113
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	80
<i>Washington Post</i>	96
<i>TIME</i>	46
Germany	
<i>BILD</i>	43
<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>	22
<i>Der Spiegel</i>	25
<i>Handelsblatt</i>	70

Coding of all relevant news content generated from the above news media of Germany and the U.S. were executed by trained human coders, who coded each of the news stories to render decisions on its news topics, frame, diplomatic source used, diplomat's attributes, tone toward China, tone toward Taiwan, and the state of bilateral relationship between either China or Taiwan and the country where the newspaper is based. Many coding items are straightforward, but topics, frames, and tone may need some explanation. Topics of news were developed and updated gradually as coding goes on – because of the study's exploratory nature (see the list in Appendix A). Frames are supposed to depict the bilateral relationship between the media-based country and either China or Taiwan; they are composed of three common international relations-oriented types: conflict, détente, and alliance. Tone of story is based on dimensional emotion: positive, negative, and neutral. These coding items are intended to capture all the elements in news stories that may illustrate the imagery or attributes bestowed on China or Taiwan. In other words, the rationale for these coding items is exploratory and the research logic inductive. The coding was executed by the authors and their intercoder reliability on all coding items reach at least .7 (with Krippendorff's alpha). More detail about the intercoder reliability for each of the coding items can be seen in Appendix B.

Findings

The news sample gathered from Germany and the U.S. indicates that there has been a large number of news stories from U.S. outlets that used diplomats from both China and Taiwan as sources. Overall, the major topics in the news from both countries pertain to international relations (43%), military and defense (13%), economics and trade (10%), culture (9%), and followed by internal politics (8%). When both major and secondary topics covered in the news from both countries were examined together, international relations (40%), military and defense (14%), and economics and trade (10%) were the top three topics.

The first research question aims to address the differences of covered topics between the press of Germany and the U.S. Their difference of topics illustrates that while the U.S. press devoted more attention to covering international relations and military and defense when using diplomatic sources from China and Taiwan, German news media covered more on economics, business, health and medicine, and culture (see Table 1). Interestingly, the press of both countries were only tepid about tourism, sciences, sports, and the environment when diplomats were included as sources.

Table 1 here.

The diplomats from the two sides of the Taiwan Strait must have vied vigorously for media attention in Germany and the U.S. The study result indicates that the Chinese diplomats during the study time-frame definitely outperformed their Taiwanese counterparts – they appeared in 425 stories, compared to merely 40 stories in which Taiwanese representatives were mentioned. In other words, Chinese diplomats were ten times more newsworthy or accessible than their Taiwanese counterparts. This statistic provides the fundamental answer to our second research question. Between the American and German press, however, German news professionals used more Taiwanese diplomats as their sources than American counterparts in the news stories (18% vs. 4%), as Table 2-1 indicates. Among the eight individual diplomats examined, Qin (154), Cui (127), and Wu (68) take the top three spots – all of them are Chinese. Shieh, a Taiwanese representative to Germany, is worth mentioning because he appeared 26 times in the German press, far more than his colleagues based in the U.S.

Tables 2-1 and 2-2 here.

The third research question inquires whether diplomats may land in stories that deliver positive tones for the countries they serve. Based on our findings, Chinese diplomats have not been instrumental in setting a positive tone for their country in the news even though they have been far more visible than their Taiwanese counterparts. More than half (53%) of the U.S. stories and 43% of the German stories pertaining to China that used diplomats as sources were found to have a negative tone toward China. Only 5% of the U.S.-originated news stories and 7% of the German stories that used diplomat sources have a positive tone toward China. The rest of the examined stories demonstrate a neutral or mixed tone toward China.

On the other side, there has not been as much news coverage related to Taiwan in both German and U.S. press. Nevertheless, the scarce coverage in both countries does not have a negative tone toward Taiwan. The majority of the stories that mentioned Taiwan are neutral or mixed (n = 95); and only a total of 20 stories in German and U.S. press are positive toward Taiwan, with equal odds between Germany and the U.S. The nationality of diplomats used in the stories about Taiwan matters: Taiwanese diplomats are more likely (38% vs. 9%) to be involved than the Chinese counterparts in the stories that have a positive tone toward Taiwan and less likely (62% vs. 91%) to be used in stories that have a neutral/mixed tone toward Taiwan. Table 3 shows that both Chinese (n = 205) and Taiwanese (n = 25) diplomats contributed – in one way or another – to the stories that have a negative tone toward China. This finding is in stark contrast with the low likelihood (n = 25) when Chinese diplomats were involved in stories that have a positive tone toward China. This finding suggests that the strategy taken by the Chinese diplomats during the study period has not worked well.

Table 3 here.

News frame is also a critical component of news stories because of its narrative perspective and underlying interpretation structure on which readers rely to learn about a foreign country in the story. This study identified and examined three distinct diplomatic frames – alliance, détente, and conflict – in the German and U.S. news that used diplomats as sources. Overall, the most salient frame used in the China-related stories is détente – 33% of the examined stories employed the frame, followed by conflict frame (27%) and alliance frame (12%). Interestingly, there are notable differences of frame use between the German and U.S.

news stories. U.S. reporters were found to use more détente (38% vs. 23%) and conflict (30% vs. 18%) frames than German counterparts whereas German news utilized more alliance frame than U.S. counterparts (28% vs. 5%). The overall crosstabulation between frames and news origins yielded a statistical significance (see Table 4 below), suggesting a difference between the two countries. Regarding the frames used in the news pertaining to Taiwan, the majority (90%) of the stories (from both Germany and the U.S.) did not use any frame. The U.S. press used alliance frame more than the German press in the stories (12% vs. 3%). No conflict frame was ever used in the stories that are related to Taiwan.

[Table 4 here.](#)

How diplomats included as sources are associated with story frames can be as important as the tones imparted to either covered country. Because stories about China were found to include more diverse frames, they were examined across the nationalities of diplomatic sources in them; that is to say, we inspected how Chinese and Taiwanese diplomats might be related to story frames about China. The results indicate that Chinese diplomats were related to story frames more frequently than the Taiwanese counterparts (75% vs. 30%), i.e., Chinese diplomats predominantly contributed to the frames China was bestowed in the press; Taiwanese diplomats' involvement in China's story frame merely happened 12 times during the entire period. Chinese diplomats have 28% odds in being involved in conflict frame and 35% odds in détente frame; on the other hand, they only have a 12% chance of being affiliated with alliance frame for their country (see Table 5). Overall, the above finding suggests that the Chinese diplomats were more likely to be involved in negative frames of China-related news stories, which is counter-intuitive to the anticipated result of practicing mediated public diplomacy.

[Table 5 here.](#)

With similar political ideology, shared beliefs in democracy, rule of law, and free market, membership of the multinational defense alliance (NATO), and above all, respect for press freedom, Germany and the U.S. nevertheless differ in their press coverage examined in this study (RQ 5). The differences between German and U.S. news coverage that used Chinese and Taiwanese diplomat sources lie in sources, topics, tones, and frames when the subjects are related to either China, Taiwan, or both. As the difference in sources, topics, and frames covered in the stories has been addressed earlier and coverage about Taiwan is scarce, the following paragraph discusses the findings about the tones about China across the two news origins.

The tone of news from the U.S. press toward China was found to be more negative than the German counterpart (53% vs. 43%); while German news tends to be more likely to convey a neutral or mixed tone (47% vs. 40%) and slightly likely to be positive (7% vs. 5%) toward China. Overall, however, the different tone patterns between the two nations are not statistically significant ($p = .135$) (see Table 6), unlike the statistical finding yielded from frames (see Table 4). When it comes to news frame of host country's relationship with China, German and U.S. press vary in their chosen frames to depict the bilateral relationship.

[Table 6 here.](#)

Discussion and Conclusion

This study content-analyzed news stories that used Chinese and Taiwanese diplomats as sources and were systematically retrieved from major German and U.S. press during the Xi

period. The findings of the empirical study shed new light on the nexus between different public diplomacy practices and media coverage of target countries across two important democratic countries in the West bloc. The Chinese diplomats have been used far more often in the news than the Taiwanese diplomats, which is not at all surprising. Yet despite China's enormous influence, bountiful resources, and eminent newsworthiness to both Germany and the U.S., the news coverage it received appears to be more negative than Taiwan's counterpart. Moreover, the diplomatic frames used in portraying bilateral relationship between the host nation with China in the stories were rarely positive, even – or despite – with Chinese diplomats' prominent involvement in the story-making. China's wolf-warrior style of mediated public diplomacy during the Xi period, as Huang (2022) and Mattingly and Sundquist (2023) pointed out, might have been pursued primarily to meet the government's domestic strategy rather than for the purpose of bolstering the country's image on the world stage. Instead of reaching the intended effects in public diplomacy for China's targeted foreign constituencies, China's idiosyncratic media practice overseas might have reflected more of the government's intended act to impress its nationalist citizens rather than international news media (Xu 2025).

In contrast to China's diplomatic style, Taiwan seems to have taken the conventional, yet nimble, approach to public diplomacy. The study provides hints by showing how the Taiwanese diplomats have performed in the press systems of Germany and the U.S. The news coverage about Taiwan during the study period has not been as visible as China, but Taiwan has managed not to generate any negative publicity after all. In terms of news tone and frame bestowed to the island, Taiwan actually is more likely to receive positive tone and frame than is China – a huge feat for a smaller, less resourceful, and unofficial diplomatic team stationed in Germany and the U.S.

Being overshadowed by superpowers and suppressed by the world's political appeasement, Taiwan's diplomatic staff strived to gain mediated space for recognition, understanding, and even strategic advantage for increasing Taiwan's soft power. Even though their effort appears to have resulted in less ideal an outcome – Taiwan still received scarce coverage and news topics that were mostly related to superpowers' interests, it avoided being always negatively portrayed as those unfortunate countries that only appear in the news when "coups and earthquakes" hit. This study's finding of David vs. Goliath in the arena of mediated public diplomacy might offer a sliver of hope for smaller, less powerful countries to get their messages across via the press. By providing empirical evidence of a systematic analysis of news content contributed by diplomats, this study contributes to both conceptual foundation and the practice of mediated public diplomacy. The ramification and implication of the study findings can be pivotal to international relations and strategic communication.

It is important to underscore that the evidence presented here due to the distinct style is not causal – but correlational. We are only able to demonstrate a possible association between differed strategies of mediated public diplomacy and differed news stories – especially in terms of frame and tone. The narrative elements bestowed on China and Taiwan in these examined stories may not necessarily be attributed to the distinct strategies executed by their respective diplomats. In other words, these results may or may not be directly manifested by the distinct styles of mediated diplomacy. There could be other relevant, confounding, and contextual factors that were concurrently at work. For example, foreign policies or international activities pursued by a country could be deemed positive or negative by the press of another, despite its diplomats' best endeavors to ensure positive media portrayal.

There are limitations of the study that should be pointed out. We have focused exclusively on the news content in the German and U.S. elite press and the diplomats as sources that were identifiable. All communication content generated – with distinct delivery channels and distribution mechanisms – by a country to the media of another should be much more copious than the news that has been examined here. Therefore, obtaining a more systematic and comprehensive content disseminated from China and elsewhere can result in a better, richer understanding of the characteristics of the content and their sources – especially for varied countries, strategical goals, and languages (Hansson and DePaula 2025; Wu 2020). Consequently, more solid findings for the study’s research questions can be engendered. We hope that more empirical studies will ensue to enhance our understanding of the impact of mediated public diplomacy.

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Table 1
Main topic by news origin

	News origin		
	Germany	U.S.	total
international relations	53 36.3%	150 45.6%	203 42.7%
economics, trade, currency	23 15.8%	26 7.9%	49 10.3%
business	8 5.5%	14 4.3%	22 4.6%
military, defense, war	9 6.2%	51 15.5%	60 12.6%
internal politics	12 8.2%	28 8.5%	40 8.4%
health, medicine, pandemic	15 10.3%	19 5.8%	34 7.2%
culture	22 15.1%	20 6.1%	42 8.8%
sports	1 0.7%	3 0.9%	4 0.8%
science, technology	1 0.7%	4 1.2%	5 1.1%
climate, environment	1 0.7%	2 0.6%	3 0.6%
tourism	1 0.7%	0 0.0%	1 0.2%
other topics	0 0.0%	12 3.6%	12 2.5%
total	146 100.0%	329 100.0%	475 100.0%

Chi-square = 35.42 df = 11 p < .01

Table 2-1
News origin by nationality of the included diplomats

News origin	Nationality of the included diplomats		total
	China	Taiwan	
	119	26	145
Germany	82.1% ^a 28.0% ^b	17.9% ^a 65.0% ^b	100.0% 31.2% ^b
	306	14	320
U.S.	95.6% ^a 72.0% ^b	4.4% ^a 35.0% ^b	100.0% 68.8% ^b
	425	40	465
total	91.4% ^a 100.0%	8.6% ^a 100.0%	100.0% 100.0%

Chi-square = 23.32 *df* = 1 *p* < .01

^a denotes row percentage; ^b denotes column percentage.

Table 2-2
Diplomats sourced in the news

Diplomat	n	%
China's		
Shi Mingde	51	11.0
Wu Ken	68	14.6
Cui Tiankai	127	27.3
Qin Gang	154	33.1
Xie Feng	25	5.4
Taiwan's		
Shieh Jhy-vey	26	5.6
Stanley Kao	7	1.5
Hsiao Bi-Khim	7	1.5
Total	465	100.0

Table 3
Tone towards China by nationality of the diplomats used in the news

Tone	diplomats from		total
	China	Taiwan	
Not relevant to China	3 0.7%	7 17.5%	10 2.2%
Positive	25 5.9%	0 0.0%	25 5.4%
Negative	205 48.2%	25 62.5%	230 49.5%
Neutral or mixed	192 45.2%	8 20.0%	200 43.0%
total	425 100.0%	40 100.0%	465 100.0%

Chi-square = 52.19 df= 3 p < .01

Table 4
Frame about relation with China by news origin

Frame of China	News origin		total
	Germany	U.S.	
No frame	45 30.8%	89 27.1%	134 28.2%
Conflict	26 17.8%	100 30.4%	126 26.5%
Alliance	41 28.1%	16 4.9%	57 12.0%
Detente	34 23.3%	124 37.7%	158 33.3%
total	146 100.0%	329 100.0%	475 100.0%

Chi-square = 58.28 df= 3 p < .01

Table 5
Frame about relation with China by included diplomats' nationality

Frame in story	Nationality of the included diplomat in the news		
	China	Taiwan	total
No frame	105 24.7%	28 70.0%	133 28.6%
Conflict	120 28.2%	1 2.5%	121 26.0%
Alliance	52 12.2%	5 12.5%	57 12.3%
Detente	148 34.8%	6 15.0%	154 33.1%
total	425 100.0%	40 100.0%	465 100.0%

Chi-square = 39.87 df = 3 p < .01

Table 6
Tone by news origin

Tone toward China	News origin		
	Germany	U.S.	total
not about China	5 3.4%	6 1.8%	11 2.3%
positive	10 6.8%	15 4.6%	25 5.3%
negative	62 42.5%	175 53.2%	237 49.9%
neutral/mixed	69 47.3%	133 40.4%	202 42.5%
Total	146 100.0%	329 100.0%	475 100.0%

Chi-square = 5.57 df=3 p = .135

Appendix

A. *Topics of news stories coded*

1. International relations (including aid)
2. Economic issues (at macro level), trade, currency
3. Business (specific firms, specific segment, or industry)
4. Military, defense, security issues
5. Political (internal) issues (including press control, freedom)
6. Health, medicine, pandemics, etc.
7. Culture events or issues
8. Energy, gas, petroleum, solar, wind, nuclear
9. Sports, sport events
10. Sciences, technologies
11. Climate, environment
12. Immigration, refugee, migration
13. Tourism
14. Other

B. *Intercoder reliability test results*

Coding Item	<i>Krippendorff's α</i>
Main Topic	.9
Secondary Topic	.7
Tone Towards China	.7
Tone Towards Taiwan	.8
Diplomat Mentioned	1
Tone Towards Diplomat	.8
Primary Attribute Diplomat	.7
Frame China	.7
Frame Taiwan	.8

¹ The complete list of Chinese diplomats and Taiwanese representatives included in the study is shown on Table 2-2.