

Challenging the wolves: how to reply to Beijing's tweet

by **Jocelyn Chey**

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An unexpected tweet from a senior Chinese diplomat on Monday 29 November provided a perfect excuse for the Prime Minister to divert attention from his domestic problems, to praise our gallant defence forces, to refer to our national values, and to stand up to the People's Republic of China, who, as everyone knows from numerous press reports and commentaries in recent months, has been threatening our trade and undermining our public institutions.

This is the first week of December and Australians are counting down to the summer break. Only two more weeks of parliament and this week the Opposition was ready to get stuck into the Government over the appalling issue of Robodebt, which had driven some of the unfortunate sufferers to desperation and allegedly, even suicide. Scott Morrison had already apologised, cancelled the scheme and announced that wrongly issued debt notices worth over 700 million dollars would be repaid.

Zhao Lijian, Deputy Director-General of the Information Department of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has been a prolific user of Twitter, particularly to criticise US foreign policy in Afghanistan and the Middle East. He once described race relations in Washington as "White Out, Black In". He condemned Pompeo for claiming that Covid-19 originated in China. With his long-standing interest in Central Asia, it is not surprising that he followed the release of the Brereton Report into war crimes committed by Australian defence forces during the War in Afghanistan. This report, with evidence of 39 murders of civilians and prisoners, has shocked the Australian public and has been widely reported overseas. It was not just shocking reading for the PRC government and Party.

Locked in a downward spiral with Canberra of tit for tat accusations, the Brereton Report provides ammunition for another round and to some extent counters Western criticism of the treatment of the Uighurs in China's Xinjiang Province. Zhao clearly intended to intensify the war of words because he wrote on Twitter, which is not available in the PRC. His words were relatively uncontroversial – he said that he was "shocked by murder of Afghan civilians & prisoners by Australian soldiers" – but the accompanying image was quite shocking.

That image was one already circulating on the PRC social media platform Weibo, created by “wolf warrior painter” Wuheqilin, who is very popular with young nationalistic netizens (and has said that China should use art to export its ideology). Wuheqilin was happy with Zhao’s use of the image and in turn took a screenshot of Zhao’s tweet, adding, “Deputy Director-General Zhao is formidable!! Smack those bastards!! Smash their defences!!!”

Some sort of response was clearly called for, but the way in which Morrison made it is very questionable. Speaking over a video link to Parliament House, he made three points: that the tweet was appalling and unacceptable; that an official apology must be made; and that China must return to dialogue at leader or ministerial level.

Let us take these three demands one by one. The tweet is shocking, but although the image is fake, the facts stand – atrocities were committed by Australian soldiers. I doubt that the PRC will be the only country to criticise our moral failings in this regard. Second, there is no chance of an official apology. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying rejected Morrison’s call the following day and said, “Is it reasonable to cruelly kill Afghan innocent civilians, but unreasonable for others to condemn such cruel crimes?” Finally, seeking to “reset” the relationship through dialogue (Morrison’s own word) after this vituperative spat seems highly unlikely.

Only a few days ago, Frances Adamson, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, said that the PRC would be wrong to assume that it was so powerful that it could set its terms of engagement with the world. Now President Xi Jinping and his officials are determined to prove exactly this point.

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