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China's Panda Diplomacy is becoming a Liability for Beijing

By: Chee Meng Tan

Panda diplomacy remains an effective tool of soft power for China. While it can help strengthen China's international relationships, it also exposes Beijing to public backlash whenever its furry ambassadors become entangled in political disputes or welfare controversies.

Japan said goodbye to its last two giant pandas on January 27, as twins Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei were returned from their host country to China. Their departure has left Japan without any pandas for the first time since 1972, when Tokyo and Beijing normalised diplomatic ties.

The Chinese government has long pursued a strategy of giving or loaning giant pandas, which are found exclusively in China, to other countries to strengthen international ties and boost its global image. Widely known as "panda diplomacy", this practice has seen more than 30 pandas sent to - or born in - Japan over the past 50 or so years.

However, relations between Tokyo and Beijing are currently tense. Comments made in November by Japan's prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, that her country could respond militarily to a Chinese attack on Taiwan prompted an angry response from officials in Beijing.

And soon after, China announced it would be recalling Japan's last two pandas from the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo a month ahead of schedule. The Tokyo metropolitan government had been negotiating with China to extend the pandas' stay or loan new bears in their place. But these talks were put on hold and the pandas have subsequently been returned.

Panda diplomacy

China's practice of sending pandas to foreign countries can be traced to the 7th century, when Empress Wu Zetian gifted two bears to Japan as a gesture of goodwill. However, modern panda diplomacy is often associated with the 1970s. That decade saw China open up and gift pandas to a number of major economies in an attempt to build ties, including the US and Japan in 1972, France in 1973 and the UK in 1974.

China's panda diplomacy has been heavily criticised by conservationists and animal advocates, who argue the bears are used as pawns in a game of geopolitical chess.

Due to declining wild panda populations, China stopped gifting pandas to other countries by 1984. Pandas were instead sent to foreign zoos on long-term loans, often lasting up to 15 years, with countries paying as much as US\$1 million (£738,000) in "conservation fees" per year to keep them.

By the peak of panda diplomacy in 2019, a total of 21 countries or territories outside of China, Macau and Hong Kong had pandas. These were South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Qatar, Russia, Taiwan, Germany, Spain, Austria, Denmark, Belgium, Mexico, Australia, Thailand, Finland, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, US and UK. That number has now dropped to 16.

One reason for this decline is that China has to be careful about which countries it chooses to engage in panda diplomacy with. Many Chinese people regard the giant panda as a national treasure, with the animal carrying deep emotional significance. Because of their status, the perceived mistreatment of pandas abroad can cause Beijing to receive intense backlash from nationalist circles at home.

For instance, when panda Le Le died of natural causes at Memphis Zoo in the US in 2023 and photos of his female companion Ya Ya looking thin and sickly surfaced online, speculation arose on Chinese social media that the US had mishandled the pandas. Some went as far as to accuse Chinese authorities of colluding with the zoo to cover up the incident.

For many of these people, the alleged mistreatment of the pandas was symbolic of what they saw as the US's bullying of China. As one comment on the Weibo Chinese social media platform put it: "Treating our national treasure with such an attitude is an outright provocation of China". Despite insistence by the Chinese foreign ministry that both pandas had been "well taken care of" in the US, Ya Ya's stay was not extended.

The desire to avoid more public backlash may help explain why China recalled Japan's last two pandas early and did not extend their stay. With tensions between China and Japan running high, it would have been difficult for officials in Beijing to justify why these cherished national symbols should stay in the hands of what [many Chinese people](#) see as a belligerent rival.

There are limits to using pandas as diplomatic tools, and not just due to the strength of nationalist feeling within China towards them.

Panda diplomacy remains an effective tool of soft power for China. This was demonstrated by [the 178,000 visitors](#) that flocked to Ueno Zoo to catch a glimpse of Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei in the month after it was announced they would be returned. The public response was so strong that the zoo had to restrict visitor numbers to the panda viewing area to 4,800 people per day, with each visit limited to one minute.

Yet there are limits to using pandas as diplomatic tools, and not just due to the strength of nationalist feeling within China towards them. China's practice of sending pandas to foreign nations has been heavily criticised by conservationists and animal advocates, who [argue the bears](#) are used as pawns in a game of geopolitical chess.

There are also [question marks over](#) whether the practice enhances [conservation](#). While foreign zoos that host pandas send China millions of US dollars a year in conservation fees, the species is currently listed as "[vulnerable](#)" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Panda diplomacy is a delicate balancing act. While it can help strengthen China's international relationships, it also exposes Beijing to public backlash whenever its furry ambassadors become entangled in political disputes or welfare controversies.

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