

Kadeer Triumph in Australia: Lessons from an assertive Beijing

By Michael Danby

The Uighur exile leader Rebiya Kadeer has good reason to express her “gratitude” to the Chinese government, when she concluded her speech to the National Press Club in Canberra, Australia’s Capital. Beijing’s heavy-handed attempt to stop the Australian government giving her a visa put the previously unknown Ms Kadeer on the front page of local newspapers. Its equally crude attempt to bully the Melbourne International Film Festival into cancelling the screening of a film about Ms Kadeer made her a *cause célèbre* and ensured that her week-long visit to Australia was a roaring success. Indeed Chinese government attempts to censor Australian/American filmmaker, Jeff Daniels’ film about her life; ‘*Ten Conditions of Love*’, scored international coverage for the Uighurs leading the New Yorker’s film critic Richard Brody to declare his solidarity; “We are all Melbournians”.

Australian media commentators have expressed puzzlement at the behaviour of the Chinese government and its diplomats in Australia, questioning their attempts to influence government decisions and to interfere with freedom of speech in a democratic country which has gone out of its way to be China’s friend.

China’s counter-productive antics over Ms Kadeer’s visit to Australia conform to a long-established pattern of behaviour. Although China has become a much more prosperous and in some ways less repressive place than it was in the days of Chairman Mao, the essentials of power have not changed – China is ruled by the Communist Party, which brooks no serious opposition to its rule.

China has been keen to blame Ms Kadeer for inciting the violence in Urumqi in July, a charge she denies. The Dalai Lama was similarly accused of stirring up the rebellion in Tibet last year. It’s impossible for an outsider to know the exact truth about these events. But as someone who has met both Ms Kadeer and (several times) the Dalai Lama, I can say I have been impressed by the firm and explicit commitment to non-violence made by both these leaders. It’s far more likely that the troubles in Tibet and Xinjiang are the result of the denial of human rights and cultural and religious freedom to the Tibetan and Uighur peoples over many years.

Influential Sydney Morning Herald Foreign Editor Peter Hartcher in an article perceptively entitled ‘Dragon is cross but business as usual’ suggests that China’s attempts to strong-arm Australia are really intended as a warning to the United States. He quotes the Chinese proverb “kill the chicken to scare the monkey.”

This might explain why China is apparently displeased with Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, a Mandarin-speaking former diplomat who has worked hard to develop better relations

with China. Rudd's mistake is that he, like Obama, takes human rights seriously, and has made frank comments in China about Tibet, the arrest of Chinese dissidents and other touchy subjects. Prime Minister Rudd has stated that it is important for Australia 'to have a calm, measured, proper framework' for handling our relationship with China. However the Prime Minister also admitted '(t)here could well be further bumps in the road ahead. Our challenge in managing these relationships is simply to negotiate those bumps in the road as they occur'.

It is equally possible, however, that the CCCP hysteria over Kadeer as well as the arrest of an Australian citizen and mining executive Stern Hu is all about money. China has been badly shaken by the current global recession. The Chinese leaders fear nothing more than social disorder, and they need a high growth rate to maintain full employment and keep China's steadily rising population happy. The price China pays for its huge imports of coal, iron ore and other raw materials is vital for maintaining the stability of China's strained economy.

The leaders of the Chinese Communist Party want three things. They want China to become a wealthy and modern state. They want China to become a great and respected power. And they want to retain complete power for themselves and their successors forever. These things are not ultimately compatible, but the Chinese leaders, blinded both by the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy they grew up with and by traditional Chinese nationalism, refuse to face this fact.

China's rapid population growth and urbanisation, its endemic corruption, secrecy and inefficiency, its increasing energy and environmental problems, its underpaid workers and over-taxed farmers, its restive intellectuals and activists, and its repressed ethnic minorities, all add up a recipe for trouble: if not now, then sooner or later. The tighter China tries to screw down the lid on these problems, the bigger the eventual explosion will be. Blaming exiles and foreign governments for China's troubles only makes the urgent task of reforming China's system of government more difficult. In this context the release of key Chinese human rights champion Xu Zhiyong the leader of the 303 dissident Chinese intellectuals grouped under the Charter 08 group is especially propitious.

In the meantime relations between the two countries seem to be settling down after the excitement over the Kadeer visit. Beijing has downgraded Stern Hu's charges from espionage to the lesser offence of commercial bribery. The arrest of Mr Hu had come about in the context of stalled 2009 iron ore price negotiations between Rio Tinto and the China Iron and Steel Association (CISA). However, according to Colleen Ryan in the Australian Financial Review (25 August 2009), in recent weeks Chinese financial newspapers have been reporting an industry backlash against CISA, with industry executives calling CISA "foolhardy" and "lacking wisdom in negotiations" for insisting on a 40% price cut when Japanese steel mills had already agreed to a 33% cut. China's economic self interest in garnering Australian resources underline that economic facts trump politics in Communist China. It only requires Australian to retain its equanimity and negotiate these bumps in the road.

The Australian Labour Party representative, Michael Danby, is the Federal Member for Melbourne Ports and the Chair of the Australian Parliament's Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee