

China Reinforces Critics' Case When It Exports Intolerance

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The People's Republic of China made the sports pages again and the references were not positive. American basketball player Enes Kanter took to social media and criticized Xi Jinping personally, on top of remarks about Chinese policy toward Tibet. Although his remarks had nothing to do with his team, league, or sport, the Chinese Foreign Ministry denounced his comments and video streaming site Tencent Sports pulled Boston Celtics games. Chinese demands flooded the internet for the Celtics to punish Kanter and apologize.

The team is not alone in Chinese basketball purgatory. Tencent has also refused to broadcast the Philadelphia 76ers, who hired Daryl Morey as president of basketball operations. Two years ago Morey, then with the Houston Rockets, tweeted in favor of pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong. Chinese officialdom and population erupted, costing the team and league big money. NBA officials, along with such players as James Harden and LeBron James, cared more about dollars than freedom and criticized Morey in hopes of staunching the loss. That, in turn, triggered a fierce domestic reaction against what was denounced as unpatriotic, venal, and craven appeasement of Beijing.

So negative was the U.S. reaction that falling in behind the PRC has become essentially untenable, even for those who prefer accommodation. Whatever the commercial costs resulting from China's action, they pale compared to the public criticism and political reaction that would likely result from any surrender to Beijing's demands. With Washington's policy and broader popular attitudes sharply critical of the PRC, Kanter reflects the dominant sentiment in America. Notably, there was no public criticism of Kanter by either the Celtics or the league. Even after he doubled down, making a video statement on the status of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, his American affiliates remained silent.

If the PRC retaliates further, he is likely to respond with even greater effect. The more Beijing treats him as a threat, the greater the media coverage he will receive. Indeed, Kanter, of Turkish heritage, has already been lauded for his political courage. He sharply criticized the authoritarian rule of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the latter's ruthless campaign against anyone associated with Fethullah Gulen's "Hizmet" movement. Ankara retaliated by imprisoning Kanter's father and seeking the player's extradition, as it has of many others who were punished for criticizing their government. China's attacks merely enhanced his already positive reputation.

Thus, the PRC is playing a losing game. And it is sacrificing its reputation by violating rules that it insists other nations respect. Beijing consistently demands that other nations stay out of its internal affairs. Yet what an American says and does about another country is viewed in the U.S. as his or her right. Demands that someone be censored or rebuked amount to what the PRC would, if the situation was reversed, instantly reject as unacceptable interference with its internal affairs.

And Kanter's situation is merely the latest episode of Chinese meddling. For instance, threats over how companies present the status of Taiwan on English language websites in the U.S. are seen as another unacceptable form of intervention in America's internal affairs, a kind of national trespass. Other examples abound.

The attacks on Kanter are especially offensive to Americans since they demonstrate contempt for one of America's most deeply held principles, freedom of speech. Beijing routinely rejects Washington's attempts to compel the PRC to respect U.S. practices. However, Chinese attacks on American principles, the insistence that Americans be punished for acting as Americans have since their country's founding, are no less outrageous to the U.S. At a time of increasing contention between the two governments, such behavior increases the gulf between the two peoples.

Equally offensive to Americans is the presumption that Kanter's actions warrant collective punishment—that his willingness to speak his mind is his team's, league's, and sport's fault. People with no responsibility for or control over his behavior then suffer for his actions. Turkey did the same with the arrest and trial of his father. That tactic discredited Ankara and strengthened Kanter's commitment to reform in Turkey—as well as public sympathy for him. Continuing Chinese threats will similarly create public and government blowback against the PRC.

No doubt, Beijing officials are responding in part to their own public's sentiments. However, the PRC's increasing foreign truculence, exemplified by "Wolf Warrior diplomacy," has undermined China's image abroad. Popular views of the PRC have crashed. Beijing has been increasingly criticized for its actions against foreigners, including threats against relatives of people detained in the PRC and use of "hostage diplomacy" for various purposes.

The point is not that China has no legitimate grievances against the West. However, the PRC typically loses more than it gains from its current confrontational approach. And its behavior plays into the critical bullying meme which has been gaining greater resonance in Asia and Europe as well as America. In the case of the European Union, a much ballyhooed investment deal appears dead because of Chinese sanctions against members of the European Parliament.

Both the U.S. and China must work to salvage a relationship which has gone very bad very fast. It is in neither nation's interest for the relationship to deteriorate further. One inevitable feature of relations will be criticism of one another, which must be accepted as normal. Rather than seek to retaliate for every harsh word spoken by someone, such as Kanter, both sides should treat such criticism as incentive to do better in presenting their national policies in as positive a manner as possible.

It has long been said that publicity is good and good publicity is better. Unfortunately for China, bad publicity has become more common but less desirable. If Beijing wants to improve its standing in the U.S., it should stop attempting to punish Americans who speak their minds.

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