



## Australia's Turn with the Torch: An Illuminating Episode

by Brendan Taylor

The Olympic torch relay ran relatively smoothly through Canberra, Australia. Aside from a handful of scuffles, violent clashes between thousands of Chinese students and pro-Tibetan protesters did not occur. Yet the torch's journey 'down under' was highly illuminating. It revealed much about the nature of Chinese power and patriotism, relations between China and the West (including Australia), and approaches for dealing with an increasingly powerful China.

Most fascinating about this leg of the torch relay was the highly coordinated response of Australia's Chinese community. Approximately 10,000 Chinese students poured into Canberra to "protect" the *Sheng Huo* (sacred flame). As many as 100 buses were hired to bring them from around Australia. They arrived in the early hours of a chilly Canberra morning determined to seize pre-determined positions ahead of pro-Tibetan counterparts. All had Chinese flags, some as large as 1.5 sq. meters and many imported from the mainland after Australian suppliers sold out.

Speculation is rife that the Chinese Embassy in Australia helped plan this impressive operation. Even if true (and it probably is, according to statements by Canberra government officials), the commitment of these loyal young cadres cannot be questioned. Standing amidst a sea of students (which few local Australians braved out of safety concerns) enthusiastically waving their flags, screaming "One China" at retreating pro-Tibetan protesters, and patriotically singing the Chinese national anthem, one could only conclude that nationalism is alive and well in China.

Pro-Tibetan protesters were outnumbered five to one, their voices drowned out by the highly coordinated student "Red Army." Few originated from Tibet, which is understandable given the relatively smaller size of Australia's Tibetan community. Most were local Australians supporting an eclectic range of causes that included Taiwan and East Turkistan independence, Falun Gong, and democracy in Burma. The predominantly European composition of this group, however, served to reinforce a growing perception among many Chinese that troubles surrounding the torch have been driven by an envious West intent on keeping China down and divided.

The resulting spike in anti-Western Chinese sentiment is deeply worrying. It threatens to create strategic ramifications that could linger long after the Olympic torch is extinguished. Princeton academic John Ikenberry, for instance, recently observed that a rare opportunity exists to integrate an increasingly powerful China into the current Western-led international order. But if growing numbers of Chinese do not feel respected or wanted as a member of that order, and if the

Chinese populace increasingly perceives a Western conspiracy designed to keep their nation shackled, then this window of opportunity will close.

Canberra's turn with the torch also shed light upon the state of Sino-Australian relations. When Kevin Rudd was elected prime minister late last year, he was caricatured as the 'Manchurian candidate'. Rudd is a fluent mandarin speaker and his strong interest in China is widely known. The Japanese media, in particular, reacted nervously to his election by predicting a dramatic tilt toward China (and away from Japan) under Rudd's leadership.

The Canberra leg of the torch relay clearly demonstrated, however, that Sino-Australian relations will not automatically be warm under a Rudd government. In the days leading up to the relay, for example, Rudd and his spokespeople repeatedly corrected Chinese officials over the role of the so-called 'Sacred Torch Protection Unit'. Rudd publicly threatened to arrest any members of this paramilitary squad that sought to play a direct security role. And when two members of the infamous blue track-suited brigade tried to get close to the flame during the relay, they were forcibly removed by Australian Federal Police Officers.

The first indications of this tension in the Sino-Australian relationship emerged earlier this month when Rudd visited China. In a controversial speech to students at Peking University, he openly acknowledged Tibet's "significant human rights problems." While a spokesman for the Chinese leadership denounced Rudd's comments, they appear to have done little to derail his trip. Indeed, the would-be 'Manchurian candidate' walked away from the mainland with a new climate change cooperation agreement and a pledge to reignite stalled free trade talks between Australia and China.

Key to Rudd's early success has been his sophisticated understanding of Beijing's 'red lines' in relation to the Olympic Games and the Tibet issue. In his Peking University speech (which was given in Mandarin), Rudd described himself as a *Zhengyou* (true friend) of China and delivered his criticisms in that capacity. He also reaffirmed Australia's recognition of China's sovereignty over Tibet. Most important, he stated his opposition to boycotting the Beijing Olympics. In so doing, Rudd was recognizing the symbolic importance of the Olympics to China. He is a student of Chinese history and understands well that this is the platform from which China will signal its arrival as a great power and shed its longstanding 'victim mentality' resulting from the 'century of shame' at the hands of Western domination.

The Rudd approach is unique among Western leaders. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have each indicated that they will boycott the opening ceremony. U.S. President George W. Bush has refused to openly

politicize the games and is reserving judgment on whether he will attend. But with all three U.S. presidential hopefuls (Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and Barack Obama) calling upon Bush to boycott the opening ceremony, and with pressure from pro-Tibetan congressional interests beginning to mount, Bush will feel the heat.

To be sure, Rudd's fluency in Mandarin, coupled with China's acute dependence upon Australia's energy supplies, arguably gives him an unfair advantage over his Western counterparts. Moreover, one cannot discount the possibility that Rudd's approach may exact a price from the Chinese leadership. Rudd's Western counterparts would still do well to examine his approach in greater depth: he may have uncovered a viable 'third way' between coddling and confronting China's Olympic sensibilities.

In sum, the Canberra leg of the Olympic torch relay didn't attract the international attention of the more fiery London, Paris, and San Francisco stages. Yet the smoothness of its execution belies the significance of the conclusions that may be drawn from it. It showed how intense the fires of Chinese nationalism can be when fanned. It reinforced the increasingly combustible nature of ties between China and the West. It highlighted unexpected tensions in Sino-Australian relations. Most importantly, it also shed new light on approaches for dealing with a China increasingly fearful that its Olympic dream could go down in flames. On a number of fronts, it was a highly illuminating episode.

*Dr. Brendan Taylor([brendan.taylor@anu.edu.au](mailto:brendan.taylor@anu.edu.au)) is a lecturer at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University.*