

Foreign critics are useful because their distance gives them a different perspective, writes **Jerome A. Cohen**

Viewed from afar

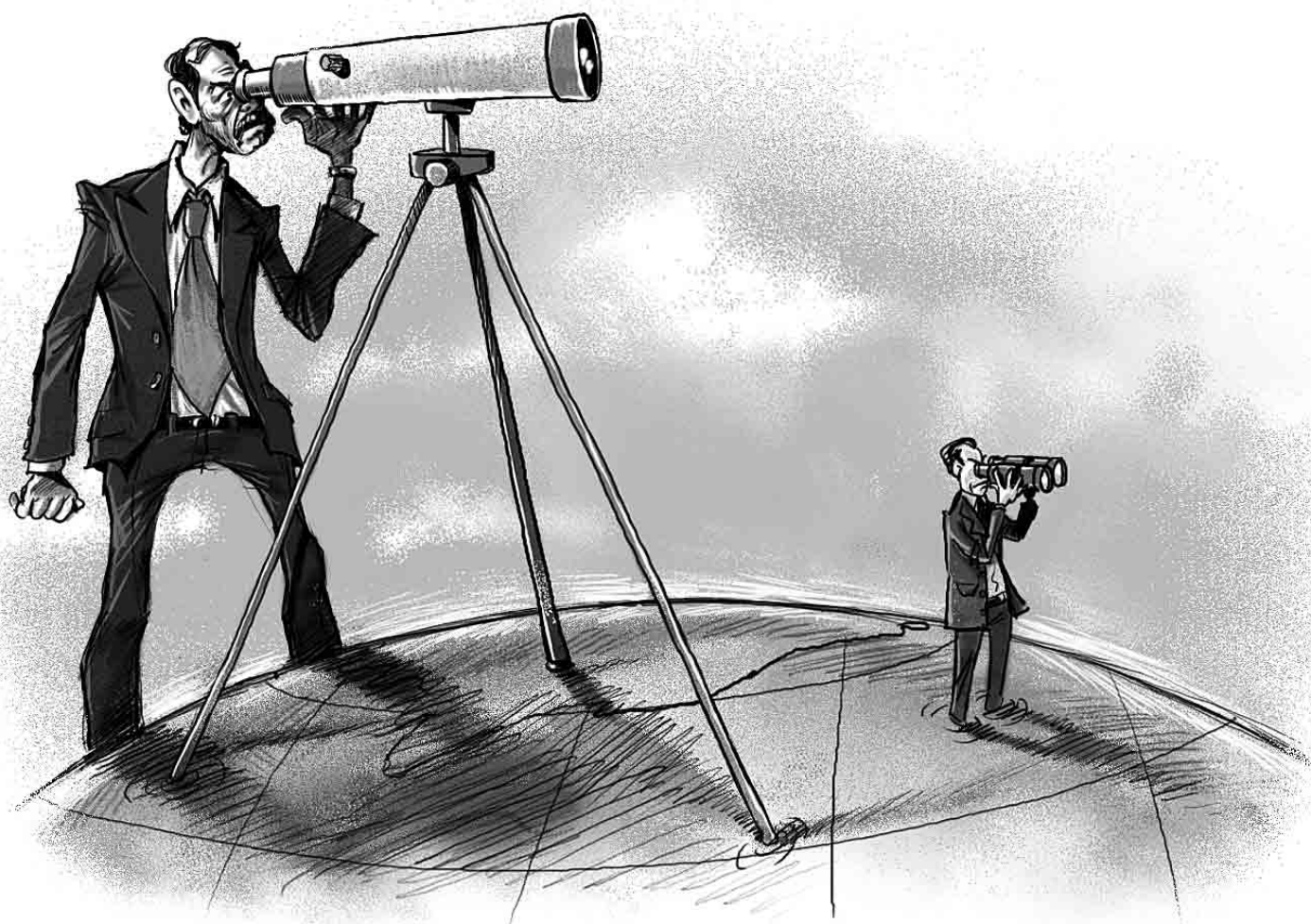
When told I had criticised the Taiwan government's recent decision to bar Rebiya Kadeer from visiting the island, Taiwan's new prime minister, Wu Den-yih, remarked: "People who do not live in our land may not understand . . . and need not take any responsibility. We respect their comments but do not necessarily adopt all of them." This polite putdown deserves reflection.

Of course, a foreign observer rarely appreciates the interests of a country in the same way as the country's leaders and citizens do. But should that preclude foreign criticism or exempt the target government from giving a well-reasoned explanation of its actions? The standing of the United States in world opinion – confirmed by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Barack Obama – has been immeasurably improved thanks to Obama's reaction to the hail of foreign criticism of his predecessor's policies. George W. Bush's administration had frequently condemned such criticism as the irresponsible carping of outsiders who did not understand or support US interests.

Politicians and commentators frequently stoke nationalistic feelings in brushing off foreigners and sometimes dismiss foreign critics as sinister or condescending. The mainland's Foreign Ministry, in particular, often describes foreign criticism as "rude interference into China's domestic affairs", made with "ulterior motives", that "hurts the Chinese people's feelings". But is such rhetoric really in the interest of its government and people?

Foreign critics are useful precisely because their distance gives them a different perspective. Also, although perhaps insufficiently informed, they are not burdened with the distractions of daily decision-making. Especially if they are "wrong", it may be wiser to offer them what Chinese communists call "persuasion-education" rather than opaque dismissal.

Informative government responses to foreign critics also benefit domestic audiences. What I had actually criticised was not the Taiwan government's decision to ban Kadeer's visit but the explanation offered by Interior Minister Jiang Yi-huah. He might have followed the precedent set by his government last December when temporarily declining a visit by another figure opposed by the mainland government, the Dalai Lama. It had simply



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noted that the timing of the visit was "inappropriate", the unspoken but understood premise being that the visit would strain the sensitive new effort at cross-strait reconciliation.

Whether or not one agreed with that decision, the explanation given was honest, respectful of audiences in both Taiwan and abroad, and not harmful to anyone. Jiang's explanation, by contrast, linked Kadeer to terrorism. At least at this juncture, that accusation seems inaccurate and unfair. It echoed Beijing's as yet unproven claims rather than the conclusions of many democratic governments – including that of her host, the US. Worst of all, it appeared to defame a person who enjoys wide respect for her struggle against the

mainland government's oppression of her ethnic group.

To be sure, every country imposes restrictions on entry. The US itself maintains an overly broad barrier against Taiwan's highest leaders, in order not to cast doubt on its recognition of the People's Republic as China's only legitimate government. But such barriers restrict domestic audiences' democratic rights to interact with important speakers and must be frequently challenged.

Another recent case of an unfortunate Taiwan reaction to foreign criticism occurred when William Stanton, the new head of the "unofficial" US mission in Taipei, pointed out that many learned Americans were concerned about the fairness of former president Chen Shui-bian's criminal trial. This led some of Taiwan's legislators and media to label his remarks impermissible foreign interference in the administration of justice.

Taiwan's minister of justice, Wang Ching-feng, however, rejected this charge. She is more aware than most of the importance to Taiwan of American perceptions of its legal system, since she is

attempting to negotiate an agreement that would require the US to extradite fugitives to Taiwan.

The US, like any nation contemplating extradition, has a valid interest in the quality of justice in the country that is requesting it and a right to express reasonable concerns. More generally, as President Ma Ying-jeou has emphasised, despite his efforts to improve relations with the mainland, Taiwan cannot afford to neglect its military defence.

That defence relies implicitly on the security guarantees of the US Taiwan Relations Act. They, in turn rest, on the American people's continuing belief that the island is worth defending, even at the cost of nuclear war. While Taiwan was once valued mainly for its strategic location, its thriving democracy and developing rule of law are now seen to deserve protection in and of themselves. Its leaders and people should keep this in mind.

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