HOME ALONE, TOO
By Ryan Kaminski

In mid-November 2010, the world watched Aung San Suu Kyi triumphantly emerge from her latest extended period of house arrest. Having spent fifteen of the last twenty-one years in her home, Suu Kyi received glowing praise for her ongoing fortitude to secure a peaceful democratic transition in Burma. Overall, Suu Kyi’s release seemed to prove that even the most authoritarian regimes have an inkling of respect for the judicial process, even if just for the cameras.

However, the same apparently cannot be said for the country that many have designated as the world’s next superpower. Indeed, following the announcement that Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, China took the bizarre step of detaining his wife, Liu Xia. Unlike Aung San Suu Kyi who had been found guilty of violating Burma’s 1975 “State Protection Act” by a junta kangaroo court, Liu Xia appears to be under a de facto house arrest simply because of her husband.

Peculiarly, not only do armed guards remain outside of Liu Xia’s apartment complex, word has also leaked out that her mobile phone has been tampered with, and that she remains under constant surveillance by Chinese authorities. It is almost impossible not to ask: is the wife of a literary critic really worth all that trouble?

Overall, the detention of both Liu Xiaobo and his wife Liu Xia exemplifies a growing tension between China’s rise and its increasingly paranoid and erratic actions both domestically and abroad. Not only is such conduct poorly reflective of China’s rising status in the geopolitical arena, it is also immensely counterproductive in terms of the dividends China has received from past ‘charm offensives.’

In addition to effectively isolating the wife of a Nobel Prize winner, for example, the Chinese government has made a series of rather awkward, if not simply petty, moves abroad. This includes tried to play hardball with Norway by canceling a bilateral meeting with the Norwegian Fisheries Minister, as well as aggressively lobbying European governments to not show open support for Liu Xiaobo at the Nobel Peace Prize Award Ceremony. During a joint China-United Kingdom press conference, China’s Vice Foreign Minister, Cui Tiankai, even ominously warned European governments

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that, “If they make the wrong choice, they have to bear the consequences.” One wonders how far China is really willing to go over a Nobel Prize party.

Not surprisingly, China boycotted the Nobel Prize Ceremony held in December 2010, along with nineteen other ‘power players’ including Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and the Sudan. Instead, China has also created its own “Confucius Peace Prize,” and has predictably bestowed it upon a loyal Chinese bureaucrat.

Another example of China’s progressively intermittent behavior is its extreme response to a seemingly minor boat collision involving a group of Chinese and Japanese fisherman in September 2010. While most signs pointed to Chinese culpability, China nonetheless demanded an apology from Japan’s government as well as compensation for damage to the Chinese boat, and warned of other ambiguous consequences if Japan did not immediately release the Chinese sailor it was holding.

While China did eventually get its captain back, the more important response was the reaction of states like Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore, which increasingly believe that it might not be in their best interest to lean toward China’s sphere of influence as opposed to that of the United States.

Together, such moves have generated significant international concern over China’s role in world affairs. In particular, it has left many wondering what happened to the China the world came to know only a short time ago during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. As a whole, its so-called “coming out” extravaganza was meant to serve as the quintessential symbol for China’s emergence as an influential and responsible stakeholder in the global arena. Gone, it was thought, were the worst foreign and domestic excesses of the Communist Party.

Burma’s junta, on the other hand, has always been known for its bizarre ‘governing process,’ which involves consultations with soothsayers, a near total disregard for the welfare of its population, and a pervasive fear that the country will be invaded by the United States at any time. The effect has been near-unlimited brutality by the military junta and a country mired in poverty. Even Burma’s callous cadre of generals, however, was able to figure out when enough was enough and permitted the nation’s leading democracy activist to regain her freedom.

With Suu Kyi’s release, China now holds the dishonor of being the only country in the world currently imprisoning a Nobel Peace Prize recipient. By also arbitrarily detaining Liu Xiaobo’s wife, Liu Xia, China has unfortunately surpassed the despotic antics of the very troubled country on its southern border.

If the Middle Kingdom is ever to win the respect its leadership so profoundly covets and its people so rightfully deserve, it needs to immediately hit the reset button regarding all things related to the Nobel Peace Prize. In short, release Liu Xia and Liu Xiaobo, and initiate a genuine dialogue on political reform. If not, it may only be a matter of time before China has its own Aung San Suu Kyi.