
Tibet: The Last Sigh or a New Dawn?

Shailender S Arya

Tibet is again in unrest, and the news — a reflection of the long simmering resentment against the Chinese rule which has erupted once more. This time, the unrest is unique in many ways; its timing threatens to mar the Beijing Olympics, the biggest international event ever to be hosted by the China, signifying its acceptance by the international community. The unexpected spread of the protests in Tibetan inhabited areas in other Chinese provinces and its subsequent span across the globe has caught the international attention in an unprecedented manner, focussing renewed attention on the crisis on the roof of the world. While the military muscle of the People's Republic of China (PRC) moves to contain this unrest, amid protests and concerns by the international community, the media spotlights and a showcase Olympics have ensured that there is no repeat of Tiananmen like repressions. This seemingly mild hand is the symbolic price which has been extracted from Beijing, but eventually it shall intensify its attempts to prevent recurrence, reinforcing its policies of demographic change and cultural integration.

On the other hand, Tibetans worldwide hope to capitalise on the momentum, binding themselves in a now-or-never situation, which may lead to the emergence of hardline factions due to the reluctance of their spiritual and temporal leader to bless a more forceful approach and the demand for complete independence. Closer home, its impact will not be limited to sporadic protests in Chankayapuri or managing high-profile visitors to Dharamsala. The presence of the largest Tibetan diaspora outside Tibet, including their government-in-exile and the Dalai Lama, shall willy-nilly, ensure increased stakes and an impact on Sino-Indian relations, in spite of a cautious official line. Meanwhile, the core

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issues which have precipitated this unrest remain unaddressed, lost somewhere between the intractable exchanges of a Western media over-sympathetic to the Tibetan cause pitted against the official Chinese propaganda.

The Beginings and the Spread

Trouble was expected in Lhasa on March 10, 2008; it was the 49th anniversary of the failed 1959 Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule in a year when China was hosting the prestigious Olympics. The Chinese authorities in their own message of national control had also planned to relay the Olympic torch through Tibet, after its arrival from Greece, culminating in the flame being taken to the top of Mount Everest on a clear day in May. It was also a week wherein the major local government leaders were away for the annual National People's Congress in Beijing. The protests, which began with peaceful protests by monks, were soon mixed with riots and attacks on non-Tibetan ethnic groups when the Chinese tried to stifle the protest by barring the monks' paths and bundling their leaders into police vehicles, surrounding Lhasa's principal monasteries and saturating the city with armed enforcers. In particular, the rioters targeted the Han Chinese, the predominant ethnic group in China, and the minority Muslim Hui ethnic community. The protests thereafter increased in scale, becoming the biggest unrest against Chinese rule in the last few decades. The unrest has been larger than the last major protests of 1989 and is now being compared to the 1959 uprising in its political ramifications.

Soon, areas with significant Tibetan populations, outside the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), were reporting similar protests. In the northwest province of Gansu, large demonstrations were held in Xiahe, a predominantly Tibetan county in Gansu which surrounds the important Labrang monastery. In Sichuan province, the capital Chengdu and areas in Aba and Ngawa counties saw violent protests. Similarly, the bordering Qinghai province witnessed clashes between the protesters and the police at the Ditsa monastery in Bayan and in the historic region of Rebkong, which is located in the Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Even in Beijing, at the Central University for Nationalities, around 100 ethnic Tibetan students organised a sit-in protest in solidarity with the protesters, a symbolic and courageous gesture in the heart of Red China. Finally, on March 20, China admitted for the first time that anti-government demonstrations had spread to other regions and that soldiers had shot rioters "in self-defence". Witnesses were later to report what appeared to be many large military convoys, up to two kilometres long, driving towards Tibet.

The crackdown had begun. Lhasa soon resembled a military fortress and

soldiers of the People's Armed Police easily outnumbered civilians on the streets of other key towns in the TAR and the neighbouring provinces. Beijing immediately set up a special security coordination unit, the 110 Command Centre at Lhasa, to suppress the disturbances, under the direct control of Zhang Qingli, first secretary of the Tibet Party and a President Hu Jintao loyalist. A large number of important army units from the Chengdu Military Region were

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deployed, including brigades from the 149th Mechanised Infantry Division, the region's rapid reaction force. The two mountain infantry units of the of Xizang Military District, which forms the Tibet garrison, were already in action, with required air support from the 2nd Army Aviation Regiment, based at Fenghuangshan, Chengdu, in Sichuan province.¹ According to a United Press International report, elite ground forces of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were involved in Lhasa and the new T-90 armoured personnel carriers and T-92 wheeled armoured vehicles were deployed. Though the dust is yet to settle down, estimates of the Western media and the Dharamsala based Tibetan government-in-exile vary between 130 and 140 fatal casualties.

One World

The support and sympathies of the world community were clearly with the Tibetans. There were pro-Tibet rallies outside the Chinese Embassies in most of the European capitals and across the US. Japan, Australia, Canada and India too saw significant demonstrations in support of the Tibetans. Often, the concerned locals and human right groups joined these largely peaceful protests which used every possible means to voice their concern and exert pressure on China. Protesters in London placed placards upon terracotta warriors on loan to the British Museum for an exhibition, while in India, hundreds of Tibetan exiles marched from the town of Dharamsala towards the Indo-Chinese border, to mark their protest against Chinese occupation of Tibet. In Greece, as the torch was being handed over to Beijing's Olympic organisers, the protesters disrupted the proceedings with "Save Tibet" chants and unfurled a banner that read "Stop Genocide in Tibet", powerful images which were rapidly beamed across the globe. US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, on a scheduled visit to India, flew to Dharamsala to lend her support to the Tibetan cause. She met the Dalai Lama and called the

Chinese crackdown “a challenge to the conscience of the world.”

These sentiments of the key US politician were shared by US allies across the Atlantic. UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown informed the House of Commons that he had spoken to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to “urge an end to the violence” and confirmed that he will meet the Dalai Lama on his visit to Britain in May. Later, US President George W Bush too added his voice to calls for a dialogue with the Dalai Lama. Similarly, Hans-Gert Poettering, the president of the European Parliament, asked Beijing to negotiate with the Dalai Lama and did not rule out Olympics boycott as an option. French President Nicolas Sarkozy too raised the possibility of boycotting the opening ceremony on August 8, 2008. The Vatican joined the fray; Pope Benedict XVI, while delivering the *Urbi et Orbi* (To the City and the World) at St Peter’s Square after the Easter Mass, said prayers for Tibet. Meanwhile, the Dalai Lama continued his appeals to the Chinese government to stop using force, and later urged the Tibetans to refrain from violence. He even threatened to resign as leader of the government-in-exile if the violence continued and reiterated his stance for only greater autonomy for Tibet, as opposed to full independence. The Dalai Lama also supported the hosting of the Olympics by China to counter the Chinese accusations of him orchestrating the riots to mar the games.

The Casus Belli

Twists of History

Tibet has a complex history which it shared with China and Mongolia with fluctuating fortunes. It was in 1720 that the Qing soldiers entered Lhasa in alliance with the seventh Dalai Lama, establishing for the first time the basis for considering Tibet as a protectorate of China.² In the subsequent years, the presence and the power of the Chinese resident commissioners (or *ambans*) in Tibet hinged on the power of the ruling Chinese dynasty vis-à-vis the Tibetan government. Pro-Chinese historians argue that the *ambans*’ presence was an expression of Chinese sovereignty, while those favouring Tibetan claims tend to equate the *ambans* with ambassadors. In any case, the relationship waxed and waned, resulting in a shifting balance of power with its differing historical interpretations.

The Chinese insist that Tibet has always been an integral part of China while the Tibetans argue that their relationship with China had been that of “priest” and “patron”, the Manchu Emperors of China being lay patrons of the Dalai Lamas and Tibet, and that Tibet had always operated under its own rulers, officials, language and laws. In these arguments, few facts are certain. On

January 1, 1912, the Republic of China was established and, one month later, the Qing Emperor abdicated. In April 1912 the Chinese garrison of troops in Lhasa surrendered to the Tibetan authorities. By the end of 1912, the Chinese troops in Tibet had returned to China. Thus, it is certain that between 1913 and 1950, Tibet was an independent Himalayan kingdom, with most of the political features that are usually associated with a sovereign state. The International Commission of Jurists, a Geneva-based human rights organisation, issued a report in 1960 which examined the legal status of the Tibetan government. The report stated; “Tibet’s position on the expulsion of the Chinese in 1912 can fairly be described as one of de facto independence.... it is, therefore, submitted that the events of 1911-12 mark the reemergence of Tibet as a fully sovereign state, independent in fact and in law of Chinese control.”³

The Tibetan sovereignty debate pivots on basic disagreement between the PRC and the government of Tibet-in-exile over when Tibet became a part of China, and whether this incorporation into China is legitimate according to the international law.

In 1950, the PLA invaded the Tibetan area of Chamdo, crushing minimal resistance from the ill-equipped Tibetan Army. In 1951, the Tibetan representatives, under PLA military pressure, signed a “17-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet” with the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) Central People’s Government affirming China’s sovereignty over Tibet. Its clauses also included assurances of religious freedom, and protecting the position of the Dalai Lama and the existing political system. However, in April 1959, the Dalai Lama formally repudiated the 17-point agreement and announced formation of his own government at Lhuntse Dzong, before moving into exile in India.⁴ This government-in-exile, based at McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala is called the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) of His Holiness the Dalai Lama but is not recognised as a government by any country. The Tibetan sovereignty debate, bitterly fought on various platforms, pivots on basic disagreement between the PRC and the government of Tibet-in-exile over when Tibet became a part of China, and whether this incorporation into China is legitimate according to the international law. Though the Dalai Lama has softened his stance and only demands autonomy within China, the scant respect shown by the Chinese to the religious freedom and to other key clauses of the 17-point agreement has indeed fuelled many *casus belli*.

Ethnic Tibet Versus China's Tar

The term Tibet denotes different meanings based on the subscription or rejection of a particular viewpoint or a political ideology. But, irrespective of the ideological divide, it is commonly agreed that the cultural or ethnic Tibet is larger than the Chinese created TAR or Xizang whose borders are administrative boundaries and have no ethnic basis. Often, the cultural Tibet is also referred to as the historical or Greater Tibet, and claimed as such by the Tibetan exile groups. This historical Tibet, which was at its zenith in 800 AD, can be geographically divided into three principal areas. The main province was U-Tsang, which included Changtang, a large frozen desert to the northwest. The two other main provinces were Kham to the east of U-Tsang and Amdo to the north of Kham. Thus, geographically the historical Tibet referred to the entire Tibetan Plateau.

Today, in a reversal of fortunes, about half of the Tibetans are estimated to live outside the TAR — many of them in nearby Chinese provinces or surrounding countries like Nepal and India. As the Chinese drawn boundaries stand on date, Amdo falls mostly in Qinghai province, with a small northern part in the Gansu province. The eastern part of Kham is in Sichuan province, with a small portion to the south in the Yunnan province. It is the erstwhile core of historical Tibet, U-Tsang with its capital as Lhasa, and western Kham, which has been designated by the Chinese as the TAR. It contains only approximately 45 per cent of China's ethnic Tibetans. As an extension of these arbitrary territorial designs of the PRC, this TAR also features the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as a "Lower Tibet." Interestingly, Tibet is also officially claimed by Taiwan (Republic of China) as an exclusive mandate.

The distribution of Amdo and eastern Kham into the surrounding provinces was initiated by the Yongzheng Emperor of the Manchu Qing dynasty during the 18th century. The same has been continuously maintained by the successive Chinese governments. The Tibetans consider these divisions as artificial and the manifestation of a shrewd Communist divide-and-rule policy. Therefore, when the government of Tibet-in-exile and the Tibetan refugee community refer to Tibet, they mean the areas consisting of the traditional provinces of Amdo, Kham, and U-Tsang, but excluding Sikkim, Bhutan, and Ladakh that had also formed part of the Tibetan cultural sphere. The term Greater Tibet, which covers the TAR, the whole of Qinghai province, western parts of Sichuan, and areas of Yunnan and a corner of Gansu is also gaining acceptance. On the other side of the spectrum, when the PRC refers to Tibet, it means the TAR, a province-level entity only consisting of U-Tsang and western Kham.

However, even the Chinese have conceded to the concept of a cultural Tibet wherein in order to refer to non-TAR Tibetan areas, or to all of cultural Tibet, the term Zàngqu, literally meaning ethnic Tibetan areas, is used. Politically too, the Chinese have designated significant areas of the nearby provinces as Tibetan autonomous areas. In Qinghai province, the Chinese government has designated 97 per cent of the area as Tibetan autonomous areas. The only area not to be regarded as autonomous is the provincial capital Xining and its environs, where most of the region's population lives. The Tibetans, consisting of about 25 per cent of the total population of Qinghai, live in the vast plains covering the rest of the province. In the other provinces, about half of Sichuan, 10 per cent of Gansu and 10 per cent of Yunnan are also designated as Tibetan autonomous areas.

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Demographic Changes

“Quantity has a quality of its own” has been an old Communist saying which has been put to suitable use in the most populous country of the world. There has been a history of a rather enthusiastic policy of demographic changes or population transfer in China. It started with China's mass settlement campaigns in Manchuria in the late 19th century which left the Manchus there in a minority. The same policy was followed in East Turkistan in the 1950s.⁵ The Chinese now call it Xinjiang (Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous Region) but the Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking ethnic group, have been many times outnumbered by over seven million Chinese settlers. Earlier too, the ethnic Han Chinese had outnumbered the Mongols in Inner Mongolia by the middle of the last century.⁶ Tibet took time, but invariably followed. Today, the migration of the Chinese into Tibet is often spoken of as the greatest threat to its stability and its political and economic integrity. Therefore, the rioting against the bitterly resented Han Chinese merchants in Lhasa in the recent unrest can be explained in this context.

As on date, it is estimated that in Tibet today there are over 7.5 million non-Tibetan settlers, including Han Chinese and Hui Muslims while Tibetans inside Tibet comprise only six million. A 1994 study into the immigration to Tibet, commissioned by the Tibet Support Group, UK, concluded that the Chinese government is responsible for having set up a framework which facilitates and

encourages migration to Tibet.⁷ The US State Department's 1995 Country Report on Human Rights Practices also acknowledged that there has been a massive influx of Chinese into Tibet. The Tibetans perceive this as a deliberate policy to destroy the Tibetan identity by swamping Tibet with Han Chinese settlers, who get the best jobs and housing, and treat Tibetans like second-class citizens. The majority of the Han Chinese also considers the Tibetans as backward and feudal, nursing strong cultural biases. This demographic aggression and poor treatment of Tibetans prompted the Dalai Lama to state in his 49th anniversary speech in March 2008, "They live (Tibetans) in a state of constant fear, intimidation and suspicion." He has also repeatedly referred to the issue as perhaps the gravest threat facing Tibet today.

These figures are disputed by the Chinese authorities. The PRC gives the number of Tibetans in the TAR as 2.7 million, as opposed to 190,000 non-Tibetans, and the number of Tibetans in all Tibetan autonomous entities combined (slightly smaller than the Greater Tibet or historical Tibet of the exiled Tibetans) as 5.0 million, as opposed to 2.3 million non-Tibetans. But these official figures are believed to underestimate large numbers from China's Han ethnic majority, who have migrated to the region in recent years to find work or open businesses. They also do not include the large number of PLA troops permanently stationed in Tibet. The gaps in the Chinese figures have been pointed out by the Tibet watchers. According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, in 2000, the number of Tibetans in all the Tibetan regions was about 5,400,000. This figure, when compared with the Chinese population calculations of Tibetans in 1959, depicts a decrease of about one million Tibetans or approximately a 15 per cent decline. Therefore, either there is a contradiction in the Chinese figures or implicit acceptance of a reduced Tibetan population.

The *modus operandi* varies and the involuntary migrations are now being substituted by economic migrations. Between the 1960s and 1980s, a very large number of Chinese prisoners were sent to Chinese labour camps (called *laogai* meaning reeducation through labour) in Amdo (Qinghai province). Post-release, they were employed locally and settled. During the Third Work Forum on Tibet held in Beijing in July 1994, the Chinese authorities publicly admitted a policy of population transfer for the first time. It was officially stated that former soldiers, paramilitary troops, cadres, technicians and entrepreneurs were to be encouraged to move to Tibet through incentives provided by the central government.⁸ These privileges and incentives offered to Chinese settlers in Tibet include employment guarantees at wage levels nearly 90 per cent higher than in China itself and three-month fully paid holidays for every 18 months of work.

Xinhua, the Chinese news agency, periodically announces that certain numbers of “outstanding leading officials and technicians” from China are being sent to the TAR. These Chinese officials and experts are supposedly sent to “assist” in the development of Tibet. Then there are numerous surveys, geological prospecting teams, specially trained university graduates and other “uniquely skilled people” who have one more skill in common. They

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They never leave Tibet. In April 1996, it was reported that some 500,000 ethnic Chinese were to be moved into Tibet to work in the copper mines and that the Beijing authorities planned to build several mining towns to house about 100,000 migrant workers. These Han migrants have the patronage from Beijing, which had launched a “great western development programme”, supposedly to reduce ethnic conflict in its underdeveloped western provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang, and to close the economic gap between China’s prosperous eastern coastal area and its poor western inland regions. The Chinese authorities hope to achieve these goals by pouring money into these two regions for local development and encouraging the Han Chinese, the country’s dominant ethnic group, which comprises 92 per cent of China’s population, to settle there.

It goes further. Blake Kerr, an American physician who visited Tibet in 1987, and wrote the book *Sky Burial* reported sterilisation being done on many Tibetan women delivering their second child at Chinese hospitals. The Tibetan language is only taught selectively till the middle school level, and, therefore, many Tibetans today cannot speak their mother tongue. Despite the economic growth, incomes in rural Tibet are only about a third of their level in China. More than one million of Tibet’s 2.7 million people (Chinese figures) live below the official poverty line of US \$ 150. The literacy rate of Tibetans is only 50 per cent as compared to 85 per cent for China, which further out-skills them in the limited job market in Tibet. They are also excluded from effective representation in local government and other government jobs.

However, it has not been smooth sailing for the Chinese. There are differing perceptions of national identity held by the Han Chinese and Tibetans. Influenced by Tibetan history and their fluctuating relations with imperial China, the Tibetans think of themselves foremost as Tibetans, not as Chinese. Conscious of this distinct and separate national identity, the improvement of living standards in Tibet has not reduced the Tibetans’ discontent with Beijing.⁹

Time is unlikely to help the Chinese. There are unresolved historical conflicts between the Chinese and Tibetans, which the incessant Chinese propaganda has not been able to sweep under the carpet. Beijing has also adopted a harsh policy against religious freedom and political protests in Tibet. The move of Chinese settlers in the rural areas has already alarmed the Tibetans and has sparked numerous protests by Tibetan farming communities, including a large protest in May 1993. The increased immigration from China into Tibet will strengthen rather than weaken the Tibetans' national feeling and their struggle against Sinicisation. Therefore, in the current circumstances, it is unlikely that Tibet would be integrated into China through economic means and the implementation of the "great western development programme."

The Train To Lhasa

On July 1, 2006, at the brightly decorated Golmud (Gormo) Railway Station, Chinese President Hu Jintao cut the ribbon and flagged off the "Qing 1" train which set out for Lhasa amidst much official fanfare. It was a US \$ 4.2 billion project completed one year ahead of the original schedule, possibly revised in view of the Olympics. The train showcased China's growing technological capabilities besides establishing the first railway link between Tibet and China's main rail network. The tickets for the first five trains heading for Tibet sold out almost immediately, with the cheapest one-way ticket from Beijing to Lhasa priced at US \$ 46, six times cheaper than the equivalent journey by flight.

The Tibetans were caught in a bind. Though not many of them were convinced by the Chinese claims that the railway shall lower the price of essential commodities in Tibet, most of them did not wish to be seen as opposed to development in Tibet. However, a large number of exiled Tibetan groups, including the International Campaign for Tibet and Students for a Free Tibet, were in the forefront of the protests against this controversial rail link. Their protests were cut short with the railway commencing operations ahead of schedule. But the food prices, spiked by an influx of the large Han population, are yet to recede and the quite different cargo carried by the railway during the recent unrest has convinced the Tibetans about the real military and political motives of the Chinese. These motives were known earlier as well. On August 10, 2001, the *New York Times* had reported that the former President of the PRC, Jiang Zemin, said of the Golmud-Lhasa railway, before he left office, "Some people advised me not to go ahead with this project because it is not commercially viable. I said this is a political decision." Even now, the Chinese state does not deny the political and strategic objectives of the railway. Senior

Politburo member Li Ruihuan has said: “Expanding Tibet’s economy is not a mere economic issue, but a major political issue that has a vital bearing on Tibet’s social stability and progress. This work not only helps Tibet, but is also related directly to the struggle against the Dalai Lama’s splittist attempts.”¹⁰

The construction of the 1,118-km-long railway from Golmud in Qinghai to Lhasa is an important part of Beijing’s campaign to develop the western regions of China, including the TAR

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and Tibetan areas in Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu provinces. But the Tibetans feel that the rail link and stations in Tibetan areas will facilitate increased exploitation of Tibet’s mineral and natural resources. It will also facilitate a substantial inflow of migrants from China to Tibetan areas, resulting in marked demographic change, environmental damage, and increased pressure on Tibet’s distinct identity. Economic development and the continuing influx of migrants have already resulted in deforestation, grassland degradation, soil erosion and loss of biodiversity in many parts of Tibet.¹¹ The railway has also addressed the logistics difficulties which were being faced earlier in maintenance of troops in the region by the Chinese, enabling further militarisation of the Tibetan plateau close to the Indian border. The higher level of sustained troop concentration on the Tibetan plateau translates into greater repression capability for Beijing in a region already swarming with large military garrisons and the suffocating presence of the Chinese Security Ministry and intelligence service operatives. Understandably, China’s *Qinghai Daily* describes the railway as the “political frontline in consolidating the south-western border of the motherland.”¹⁰

There were also reports from the Toelung Dechen county and certain other areas near Lhasa, of the Chinese authorities relocating Tibetans without adequate compensation to make way for the railroad. This has further antagonised the Tibetans, rather than making them stakeholders in this massive project. They suspect that the improved inter-regional access to the Tibetan plateau, in combination with other government-sponsored incentives, will facilitate the expansion of existing settler communities and prompt the establishment of new ones. Evidently, population movements will be encouraged by the shorter travel times, lower transportation costs, and enhanced connections to an increasingly Chinese cultural and economic network. In the next three years, the railway shall

be extended 270 km from Lhasa to the region's second largest city of Shigatse (Xigaze), the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama. The Shigatse prefecture borders India, Nepal and Bhutan. The train to Lhasa goes far.

Cultural Divide

In January this year, Radio Free Asia, a private radio station funded by the US Congress, reported that Chinese officials are imposing new restrictions on Buddhists in the TAR, but, at the same time, they have recruited 140 Tibetan young people to perform traditional dances at the upcoming Beijing Olympics. The dancers are being trained to demonstrate that Tibetans are happy under Chinese rule. Come August and while the world shall applaud their near perfect performance at the Beijing National Stadium, better known as the Bird's Nest, in Tibetan areas, novice monks are no longer allowed to replace monks who die and the Tibetan government officials are banned from wearing the traditional Tibetan dress and maintaining prayer rooms or altars in their homes.¹³

Buddhism has essentially been a very tolerant and assimilative Eastern religion. In the 8th century, when it gradually replaced the indigenous Bon religion of Tibet, it assimilated most of the practices of the previous religion. Thus, the Bon's cult of divine kingship was reformulated in Tibetan Buddhism as the reincarnation of Lamas and its underworld reappeared as the lesser Tibetan Buddhist deities.¹⁴ But today, it faces its perhaps severest test under the Communist rule in Tibet whose ideology considers religion *per se* to be poison. China's promise to protect and respect Tibet's religious traditions was an essential part of the 17-point agreement of 1951. It also included numerous terms to safeguard the function and power of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. Another of the specific protections mentioned in the agreement was that it would not affect the income of the monasteries.

The promises did not last the decade. In 1958, the promises not to interfere with the practice of Tibetan Buddhism were discarded in areas outside central Tibet, in regions where Communist reforms were being introduced. At first, the monasteries and monks who controlled the land were targeted as part of land reforms. But soon, religion in general became a broad target of attack. Later, during the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution in China, Tibet was hard hit with thousands of monasteries, temples and cultural sites destroyed and Tibetan Buddhists subjected to particularly intense persecution. The Tibetans claim that till date, 6,254 monasteries have been completely destroyed, including huge monasteries like the Debu monastery in Wasa, which had over 10,000 monks before 1959.¹⁵ On the other hand, the Chinese officials indicate that there are

now about 46,000 Buddhist monks and nuns currently in Tibet and more than 1,700 monasteries, temples, and religious sites. The government of the PRC also claims that, since 1976, it has contributed some US \$ 40 million to restoring the holy places that were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁶

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, the death of Mao Zedong in September 1976 and the appointment of the relatively liberal Hu Yaobang as the Party's general secretary, there was easing of restrictions on religious expression which ushered in a period of comparative leniency for religion. However, the continued popularity and rapid growth of

Tibetan Buddhism alarmed China's top leaders who then launched a new wave of regulations subjecting monasteries and nunneries to greater scrutiny and control. Since 1996, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has rigorously enforced a patriotic reeducation campaign by sending "work teams" into monasteries and nunneries throughout Tibet. In the course of conducting these patriotic reeducation sessions, work teams seek to identify, expel or arrest dissident monks and nuns and ensure that Party principles prevail over any competing Buddhist doctrines. In 1994 too, the Third National Forum on Work in Tibet had introduced more far-reaching restrictions on religion. These guidelines included: stricter control over the monastic institutions; a ban on the reconstruction of religious buildings except with official permission; limits on the number of monks and nuns per monastery; and the screening and reeducation of the monks and nuns in order to register or deregister them. Furthermore, the Third Forum initiated an especially hostile and aggressive campaign against the Dalai Lama's authority and the CCP identified the influence of the Dalai Lama and the "Dalai clique" as the root of Tibet's instability.¹⁷ It may be noted that the implementation of the state religious policy has been particularly harsh in Tibet because of the close link between religion and Tibetan identity and nationalism.

A range of government structures has been erected in Tibet to keep religious practice under limits acceptable to Chinese leadership. The Democratic Management Committee (DMC), set up in all monasteries and nunneries to implement Party policies and regulations, monitors regions distant from

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Beijing. The DMCs act as the eyes and ears of the Party in monasteries and nunneries. Many monks and nuns have faced imprisonment for possessing a picture of the Dalai Lama, or for refusing to formally declare his or her opposition to the Dalai Lama and his policies — actions that are now considered grave political crimes.¹⁸ Many of the harsh and wide-ranging regulatory measures are a recent reaction, introduced and vigorously imposed in China from March 2005 and in the TAR from January 2007. The tourists may again flock to Tibet to pose in front of imposing Potala Palace in Lhasa and the weeping monks may no longer be found in the Jokhang Monastery (they spoiled a carefully orchestrated journalists' visit to Lhasa on March 27, 2008); but behind the scenes, monks and nuns must continually undergo mandatory political training, or 'patriotic education' to ensure that their views are in conformance with Communist ideology. The divide is deepening.

The Dalai And The Panchen Lamas

The Panchen Lama is the one of the two highest ranking lamas, together with the Dalai Lama, in the dominant Gelug-pa sect (the Yellow Hat school) of Tibetan Buddhism. He heads the powerful Tashilhunpo monastery and his name "Panchen" means the "Great Scholar," a title given by the Fifth Dalai Lama. The Panchen Lama, being the second highest religious figure in Tibetan Buddhism, bears part of the responsibility for finding the incarnation of the Dalai Lama and vice versa. Choekyi Gyaltsen, the 10th Panchen Lama, was an important political figure in Tibet following the 14th Dalai Lama's escape to India in 1959. However in 1989, the 10th Panchen Lama died suddenly in Shigatse, at the age of 51, shortly after giving a speech critical of the Chinese occupation.

Subsequent to the unexpected death of the 10th Panchen Lama, the search for his reincarnation was led by Chadrel Rinpoche, the head of the search committee and, finally, in the beginning of 1995, the Dalai Lama officially recognised the Tibetan child Ghedun Chokyi Nyima, born in 1989, as the legitimate successor to the deceased Panchen Lama. A few months later, during a raid on the great Tashilhunpo monastery at Shigatse by the Chinese police, the little Panchen Lama disappeared. The incident was quickly known worldwide and even the European Parliament, by a resolution dated July 18, 1995, gave notice of its "serious concern at the news of the sequestration of the Tibetan boy Ghedun Chokyi Nyima and his parents by the Chinese authorities."¹⁹

Enter more of the Chinese intrigue. The Chinese authorities arrested Chadrel Rinpoche, who was replaced with Sengchen Lobsang Gyaltsen, a political opponent of the previous Panchen Lama. The new search committee decided to

ignore the Dalai Lama's announcement and chose a new Panchen Lama from a list of finalists, which did not include Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, by drawing lots from the Golden Urn. On November 11, 1995, the Chinese candidate Gyaltzen Norbu, the six-year-old son of a security officer, was announced as the reincarnation of the deceased Panchen Lama. He was raised in Beijing and has appeared occasionally on state media, looking fairly innocent. The whereabouts of the real Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, are

The implementation of state religious policy has been particularly harsh in Tibet because of the close link between religion and Tibetan identity and nationalism.

unknown but not difficult to guess. Amnesty International has declared him to be the world's youngest political prisoner. Meanwhile, the PRC-selected Panchen Lama is rejected by exiled Tibetans and anti-China groups who commonly refer to him as the "Panchen Zuma" (literally "fake Panchen Lama").

Things have fared only a little better for the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and the temporal head of all Tibetans worldwide. In Tibetan Buddhism, the successive Dalai Lamas form a lineage of (*tulku*) magistrates and religious leaders which goes back to 1391. Between the 17th century and 1959, the Dalai Lama was the head of the Tibetan government, administering a large portion of the country from the capital Lhasa. However, post his forced exile in India since 1959; though he remains the spiritual head of all Tibetans, commanding great respect and international recognition, he only heads the nominal government-in-exile or the CTA. He is easily the world's most famous Buddhist monk and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, an honorary Canadian citizenship in 2006, and the United States Congressional Gold Medal on October 17, 2007. He is also credited with making the Tibetan cause known worldwide by following an admirable (and rare) peaceful approach, winning Western sympathy and vocal support from numerous public figures as well as lawmakers from several major countries. And even today, despite the lack of a positive response from China, the Dalai Lama advocates a solution to the Tibetan problem through what he calls the "middle-way" approach.

In April 2005, *TIME* magazine had placed the Dalai Lama on its list of the world's 100 most influential people. However, the future of his esteemed office seems uncertain as China has claimed the power to approve the naming of high reincarnations in Tibet. In September 2007, it stated that all high monks must be approved by the Chinese government, which would include the selection of the

15th Dalai Lama after the death of Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama. This decision cites a precedent set by the Qianlong Emperor of the Qing Dynasty, and it effectively means that China may (and will) attempt to direct the selection of a successor, using the authority of their chosen (fake) Panchen Lama. These regulations could also potentially result in one Dalai Lama approved by the Chinese government, and another chosen outside Tibet, perhaps in India. Since the Chinese puppet Dalai Lama shall never be acceptable to the Tibetans as well as the international community, it is likely to fuel an intense propaganda war and provoke the Tibetans for another round of showdown with Beijing. The Chinese play with this high seat has the potential to turn the movement violent, an encore of the 1950s and 1960s guerrilla warfare days. Already there are calls from radicalised exile groups like the Tibet Youth Congress to reexamine the middle-way policy and push for complete independence. It is the Dalai Lama who has been responsible for keeping the movement largely peaceful, particularly in India. The protests in Tibet have a history of turning violent and the demonstrations in Western countries during the last decade or more have been for independence and not only for cultural preservation. But the Chinese have continually rejected the 72-year-old Dalai Lama's conciliatory gestures, including the acclaimed five-point peace plan. For once, their wait is not inscrutable.

Friends Or Foes

In 1999, John Kenneth, one of the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives responsible for covert actions in Tibet, authored a book aptly titled *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival*.²⁰ The book documented the CIA's covert operations in Tibet, commencing in 1956. It had explicit details regarding the CIA's secret military training camps for Tibetan resistance fighters at Camp Hale near Leadville, Colorado, and the setting up of the CIA Tibetan Task Force by Roger E McCarthy. It also covered the establishment of Chusi Gangdruk, a guerrilla army of about 2,000 ethnic Khampa fighters who fought the Chinese from bases such as Mustang in northern Nepal. The improved relations between Washington and Beijing, initiated by President Richard Nixon's February 1972 visit to Beijing, ended this US backing. Meanwhile, the hopeful Tibetans had revolted in 1959, an uprising which left thousands dead and over 100,000 fleeing to India, including the Dalai Lama. The subsequent withdrawal of US support left them orphans and wary of any more Western promises.

The Tibetans were on the wrong side of *realpolitik* earlier as well. This time it was "The Great Game", a period of intense rivalry between Russia and Britain in the late 19th century. In 1904, a British advance mission, accompanied by a

large military escort, had invaded Lhasa. The head of the mission was Col Francis Younghusband, and the principal pretext for the British invasion were reports that Russia was extending its footprint into Tibet and possibly even giving military aid to the local Tibetan government. The Dalai Lama fled to Urga in Mongolia and an “Anglo-Tibetan Treaty” was signed by lay and ecclesiastical officials of the remaining Tibetan government, and by representatives of three monasteries. The treaty dictated Tibet to open its border with British India, to allow British and Indian traders to travel freely, not to impose customs duties on trade with India, a demand for paying Rs 2.5 million as indemnity and not to enter into relations with any foreign power without British approval.

The “Great Game” and the Cold War may have ended but the Western governmental response has always been dictated by either economics or *realpolitik*. While the growing economic might of China needs no introduction, experts now feel that Washington’s Asia policy has been skewed by heavy US reliance on China to end North Korea’s nuclear weapons drive. Therefore, it was no surprise that recently the US State Department decided to delist China as a top human rights violator. But in the public domain, Tibet has always occupied a unique place in the Western imagination as a romantic, mysterious and remote mountain kingdom of incarnate lamas and nomadic herdsman. Public opinion and sympathies are with the Tibetans. Part of it can be explained by the tinge of guilt the Americans feel for abandoning the Tibetans to their fate and a part may be attributable to the traditional support of the Western public for the underprivileged and the underdog. The charisma of the Dalai Lama has also attracted many Hollywood celebrities to the Tibetan cause, including Richard Gere and Steven Segal, who have made it fashionable in the West to be associated with Tibet. Steven Segal had once embarked on a Tibet film project, perhaps encouraged by the commercial success of the 1997 hit “Seven Years in Tibet.” His film was provisionally titled “Dixie Cups” — a name CIA operatives once used for expendable allies in covert operations. Clearly, the Tibetans need to be careful and tread cautiously — young Tibetans need not die on the streets of Lhasa in somebody else’s war.

Hopes For A New Dawn

The US led boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics or the retaliatory Eastern Bloc boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics failed to achieve anything substantial. To be fair to the Chinese, sports and politics should not be mixed. But all the Tibetans’ attempts and hopes, without exception, have met with typical Chinese indifference and more propaganda. Today, the problem stands at a crossroads

as Tibet has catapulted as a major concern around the world at a time when a “New China” eagerly awaits the world, ready to showcase spectacular sporting infrastructure and taxi-drivers who understand English. This “New China” was also evident during the unrest, with its sensitivity to media reports and a reluctant willingness to talk with the Dalai Lama, indicating to the world that it is no Myanmar. Correspondingly, most of the Tibetans are ready to reconcile themselves to a genuine autonomy in place of complete independence. Their younger generation is less intensely connected with the past in a changing Tibet, though the *casus belli* very much persist. This opportunity may not present itself again for the years to come. A new dawn awaits Tibet as well as China in the form of a truly autonomous Tibet. A Hong Kong is always preferable to Taiwan.

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Saunders is a writer and journalist working for the International Campaign for Tibet and consequently her views may be one-sided. The subject article can also be seen at World Tibet Network News, published by the Canada Tibet Committee, Issue ID: 05/07/26; July 26, 2005.

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