

**Statement by Elliot Sperling, Associate Professor of Tibetan Studies,
Department of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University, to the Roundtable:
“A Year After the March 2008 Protests: Is China Promoting Stability in Tibet?”
Congressional-Executive Commission on China
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I would like, at the outset, to express my gratitude to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China for inviting me to appear before you today. I have addressed this commission before on the basis of my work on Tibet’s history and Tibet’s historical and contemporary relations with China. In addition to serving on the faculty of the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University and I have also served as a member of the Secretary of State’s Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad (1996-1999).

Over the last several weeks there has been a buildup of tension in Tibet, set against the background of Chinese security measures meant to maintain order and stability. The question before this hearing is whether or not China has established stability in Tibet. The short answer is at this moment by and large yes. But that needs to be qualified by pointing out that the stability in question has been established at the cost of imposing an effective lockdown on Tibet, as some observers have termed it. In addition to the ongoing detention, according to Human Rights Watch, of hundreds of prisoners who have been held since last year, we have reports this year of monasteries blockaded and internet and cell phone use cut over large areas of the Tibetan Plateau. The security presence in Tibetan areas is reportedly high and very visible. So yes, there is stability, but at the price of severe security measures and a population subject in places to severe restrictions on movement and communication.

Part of the measures designed to secure Tibet are also related to the imposition of political education, inside and outside monasteries, meant to reaffirm China’s narrative of Tibet’s historical place within the Chinese state. This is tied to the fact that discontent in Tibet inevitably centers on the legitimacy of China’s presence there. The fact that March 10, which Tibetans observe as an effective national day, is the day on which massive protests began last year (and which was the targeted day for the lockdown this year), with protestors commonly using the forbidden Tibetan flag as their symbol, attest to the nationalist content of Tibetan resentments

and grievances. This is not to downplay the other areas of repression; but it is to assert something that this commission should bear in mind. The U.S. Government often likes to view the Tibet issue as largely one of religious or cultural freedom. While there are certainly religious and cultural issues at play, there needs to be some acknowledgement of the underlying nationalist sentiment. We may wish the Tibetans were saying something else, but they're not, and if we wish to understand what's going on in Tibet we need to pay attention to what they are saying.

The Tibetan sentiments I've described need to be seen as a rejection of China's decades-long efforts to control the interpretation of Tibet's history, asserting both for domestic and foreign audiences that Tibet has been a part of China since the 13th century without break, and that claiming otherwise is a distortion of Tibetan history. But the distortion lies elsewhere: Chinese writers did not make such claims until after the 1950s. The general trend in the first half of the 20th century was actually to claim Tibet only since the 18th century. But more to the point, those claims were *not* that Tibet had been an integral part of China, but rather that it had been a vassal state; i.e., a subject state within an empire. It's hardly surprising that Tibetans view the end that China put to Tibet's independence as an act of unprovoked aggression. At a minimum we too have to acknowledge that history contradicts modern Chinese assertions.

Given these facts, we may better understand that we are now seeing a contest over historical time in Tibet. Last month we saw a struggle over celebration and commemoration vis-à-vis Tibetan New Year. A mass movement to demonstrate respect and mourning for those who lost their lives in the protests a year ago by not celebrating the New Year (which fell this year on February 25), rippled successfully across the Tibetan Plateau and the Tibetan exile community. China tried to cajole and force celebrations, but largely without success.

Now March is with us, and the struggle is between the Tibetan adherence to marking March 10 as a national day (which is precisely what precipitated the mass demonstrations and protests last year) and China's determination to purge the month of any such significance by instituting instead a new holiday: March 28, Serfs Emancipation Day. There is no doubt that March 10, which came and went three days ago, was stifled, with tremendous effort by the Chinese authorities. But the manner in which it was done must certainly have nurtured further

resentments and grievances. Indeed, the arrests and deaths of Tibetans in previous March 10 incidents (including last year's) only serve to strengthen the resonance of the struggle that the date represents and link later generations to the history of March 10, 1959. As for the new holiday, there is no question that it will only be realized by coercive government dictate.

The creation of this new holiday is relevant to our understanding of the collapse of talks between The Dalai Lama's representatives and the Chinese government in November. Many understood that those talks were long-doomed; meant only to drag on until the Dalai Lama's death, when China would select its own Dalai Lama and, so it believes, resolve the Tibet issue. After these last talks ended the Tibetan delegates returned to India, vowing to make no statement before a Special Meeting convened in Dharamsala. But there was no need for them to speak. Within days, their Chinese counterparts held a press conference and said the talks had gone nowhere. They rejected any compromise with the Dalai Lama on any of his proposals about the nature of autonomy within Tibet and stated that, while the door was open for him to return, he would have to recognize the errors of his ways. After almost thirty years of contacts China signaled that they had never advanced beyond square one.

Significantly, in 1981 Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang asserted to the Dalai Lama's brother, Gyalo Thondup, that "There should be no more quibbling about past history, namely the events of 1959. Let us disregard and forget this." And in its dealings with the Dalai Lama's exile government China operated under that premise. China's decision to recognize and commemorate March 28, 1959 as Serfs Emancipation Day put 1959 back on the table and signaled that the talks really are at a dead-end. But that was already clear.

So what might the U.S. do in these circumstances? We are all aware of Secretary of State Clinton's February 21st statement that human rights concerns about China "can't interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis, and the security crisis," While such comments are unhelpful, the feckless policies and empty threats over Tibet that have been made in the past are the real problem. Under Bill Clinton, revocation of Most Favored Nation trade status (or PNTR) was periodically threatened to no effect, while George Bush, for his part would not even make the symbolic gesture of skipping the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics.

The fact is, Secretary of State Clinton simply articulated the real nature of U.S. China policy. The Obama administration certainly cannot be expected to act on the nationalist sentiments of Tibetans, especially when the Dalai Lama's and U.S. policy has long been to recognize Tibet as a part of China. The Secretary of State could continue making the empty gestures of advocating simple religious freedom and urging more talks; or she could adopt the cynical position advocated by Nicolas Kristoff, that Tibetans should accept one-party Communist rule and some sort of "cultural autonomy," leaving democratic aspirations out of the picture. These two options are hardly satisfactory.

What she and the administration absolutely mustn't do is add to the history of empty threats over Tibet. But they can address Chinese abuses in Tibet in every reasonable forum, strongly and without apology. Secretary of State Clinton can make China deservedly uncomfortable without the unrealistic threats; but she has to commit to a forceful human rights agenda. She should not fool herself that the issue is simply a religious one. She has to understand what it is that motivates Tibetan protest, and even though the administration might wish Tibetan aspirations were not nationalist in nature, it must support, in absolute terms, the right of Tibetans to voice their aspirations peacefully. These are things she can do. Or, she can reiterate once more, if anyone didn't hear it the first time, that human rights in China will not be treated seriously until the crises in global warming, finance and security are solved.