

**SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE TIBET ISSUE**  
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I am grateful to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China for affording me this opportunity to appear before you. Over the course of many years I have been engaged in the study of Tibet's history and Tibet's relations with China, both historical and contemporary. I am presently the chair of the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University and I have served as a member of the Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad (1996-1999).

The historical perceptions that underlie modern Chinese policies toward Tibet are relatively clear: it is the position of the People's Republic of China that Tibet became an integral part of China in the 13th century; that this sovereignty over Tibet was claimed by all subsequent dynastic rulers; and that inasmuch as China has consistently been a multi-national state, the fact that two of the three dynasties involved in this rule were established by Mongols and Manchus has no bearing on the question of Chinese sovereignty. With the collapse in 1911 of the last imperial dynasty, the Qing dynasty of Manchu rulers, Chinese claims were taken up by the Republic of China and in 1949 by the PRC, which was able to fully implement them. In May, 1951, following military clashes that left Tibet with no real defense, the central government of China concluded an "Agreement on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" with the government of the Dalai Lama.

This account of Tibet's history, an emotional and nationalistic perception of Tibet as a centuries-old "integral part of China," is used to introduce almost all official Chinese polemics and arguments about Tibet and its history, ancient and modern and underpins China's assertions about its place in Tibet. Suffice it to say, outside the PRC, China's claim to continual sovereignty over Tibet from the 13th century on are often disputed; and the existence of a de facto independent Tibetan government under the Dalai Lama prior to 1951 is often adduced to contradict that claim. Since the establishment of the PRC the emotional element inherent in China's claim has been significantly nourished by the ideological imperatives inherent in the writings of Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao. The view derived from their ideas holds Tibet's integration into China to be part of the inevitable workings of History, as nations and peoples inexorably move together. This is, of course, an idea that is now rarely, if ever, overtly invoked or even seriously considered. It is sustained by inertia as much as anything else and as such has served to solidify a dogmatic attitude towards Tibet. None of this is meant to deny that Tibet also has a marked strategic significance for the PRC. It occupies a sensitive border area and thus, out of concern for stability (including stability in other areas of the PRC that are potentially restive), the Chinese government has clearly felt a need to integrate it as closely as possible with the rest of the country. To that end Chinese migration into the area is significant in the development of an economy-albeit a Chinese-dominated one-that binds Tibet ever closer to China. Be that as it may, in stating its case China has never based its claim to sovereignty over Tibet on military or security concerns. It has been based on the historical argument.

The ideological considerations that I have described have exerted an influence on the situation that is sometimes poorly perceived, particularly when proposals for bridging the positions of the Chinese government and the Tibetan government-in-exile are considered. On several occasions the latter has put forward propositions for a special status or condition for Tibetan areas within the PRC on the basis of the distinctive nationality of Tibetans. These have been rejected for reasons that can only be understood from an ideological perspective. For China the great cultural and national differences between Chinese and Tibetans cannot be a basis for special treatment within the PRC, since these distinctions are in theory defined as superficial, unlike the profound differences that China's ideological theorists recognize between the social and economic systems in the PRC proper and Hong Kong (or between the systems in the PRC and on Taiwan,

for that matter). Not surprisingly, the PRC rejects such propositions (including proposals to lump all Tibetans in the PRC into one large, Tibetan autonomous unit) since they are grounded in national concerns rather than in concern about differences in social and economic development. In essence then, the Tibetan question is settled as far as the PRC is concerned. China would like to bring in amenable exile elements but does not consider this essential and will do so only on its own terms. The perception that the PRC has been unforthcoming in offering creative solutions to the impasse that has developed between it and the Dalai Lama's government in exile is largely rooted in this stance.

But for Tibetans opposed to Chinese rule the Tibet issue remains a nationalist issue. This fact has been elided, by both the U.S. government and the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile. For the U.S. government, which has never recognized Tibet's independence, support for Tibet is largely limited to political and human rights, and cultural issues, which are not the crux of what Tibetan nationalist agitation is aiming at. The Dalai Lama, through the Tibetan government-in-exile, has willingly discarded a policy of seeking independence for Tibet in hopes of reaching an accommodation with China that would allow Tibet internal autonomy and preserve Tibetan culture. These approaches are problematic, but both have been tied to calls for direct negotiations between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government.

As concerns the position of the United States, there has been a certain myopia inherent in its perception. To wit, hoping that improved political and material circumstances will alleviate Tibetan discontent ignores a well-known dynamic. When a highly authoritarian state begins to liberalize it is then that dissent spills over; we've seen this in many situations (the lack of understanding of this process is no doubt why so many Americans were perplexed about Gorbachev's lack of popularity in the waning days of the USSR). As conditions improved in Tibet, during the early part of Deng Xiaoping's liberalizing break from the Maoist past, we saw more, not less, discontent, because at heart the core of the issue in Tibet is one of Tibetan national aspirations, not material conditions.

The preservation of Tibetan culture as a U.S. foreign policy goal also presents some problems. Tibetan culture, like any other, is dynamic. Calling for its "preservation" automatically brings forth the need for it to be defined, and this in turn leads to a stuffed-and-mounted item fit for a museum. In fact, for most people calling for the "preservation" of Tibetan culture, that culture is largely equated with clerical and monastic life, or with what might be termed folk culture. Tibetan culture does not need to be frozen in time, but Tibetan cultural life needs to be protected from measures that repress literary and artistic expression. In Tibet today secular writers and artists-and they do exist-working with modern forms, are every bit a part of the Tibetan cultural scene.

The focus on bringing China into negotiations with the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile has also been mired in misperceptions. For its part the Tibetan government-in-exile has often acted as if the sole obstacle to talks was China's failure to understand that the Dalai Lama did not advocate Tibetan independence. To that end, the government-in-exile would often urge diplomats and leaders from the U.S. and other countries to communicate to China that the Dalai Lama sincerely sought a solution that would leave Tibet within the PRC. However, with the simple goal of buying time, China has often decried the manner in which the Dalai Lama rejected independence, demanding certain other concessions (e.g., recognition of China's sovereignty over Taiwan), or displays of greater sincerity, etc., none of which have been sufficient to meet with Chinese approval. As a result, the Dalai Lama has tried to comply and has, as a result, become a significant actor in a strategy of delegitimizing support for Tibetan independence. This has not made negotiations imminent by any means, but it has undermined the position of Tibetan activists in exile and inside Tibet agitating for Tibetan independence.

What has become clear (even, of late, to members of the government-in-exile) in all this, is the fact that China's strategy is to look towards a resolution of the Tibet issue via the death of the Dalai Lama. Hence the tactic of buying time, which brings us to the ongoing controversy over the Panchen Lama, the incarnate

hierarchy generally considered second to the Dalai Lama within the Dge-lugs-pa sect of Tibetan Buddhism (the sect of the Dalai Lamas). Chinese moves here have been quite cynical: they have involved the Communist-led government of an officially atheistic country in the mission to discover the true reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, who, in turn, would normally recognize and enthrone the next Dalai Lama. What this clearly implies, of course, is that the next Dalai Lama will be chosen, groomed and educated in a manner according with PRC needs and PRC control. The result has been the recognition in 1995 of one child (now held incommunicado) by the Dalai Lama and another by the PRC authorities. The latter lives in Beijing, with all the trappings of a Panchen Lama, but is largely unaccepted by Tibetans. The tensions engendered by these sorts of heavy-handed and repressive incursions into religious life prompted the flight into exile in January 2000 of the Karmapa Lama, another high ranking incarnate lama who now resides in Dharamsala, India, the exile seat of the Dalai Lama. As a result, Chinese attempts to bring Tibet's resident Buddhist establishment into line cannot be deemed successful, and this does not bode well for Chinese hopes at influencing Tibet's population in general to accept a Tibetan Buddhism with the "Tibetan" element in check. Nevertheless, all of this points to a sense, on the part of the Chinese government, that whatever the inconveniences, China is capable of forging ahead in Tibetan matters without the cooperation of the Dalai Lama; if the Dalai Lama wishes to acquiesce and assume the ceremonial place that China is willing to grant him, well and good. Otherwise it is of little consequence to Chinese policies that he is not on board.

U.S. policy in pushing for negotiations between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government has largely followed the lead of the Tibetan government-in-exile and has not fully reflected China's decision to write the Dalai Lama out of the picture. One may debate the wisdom of that decision, but it is time to acknowledge that this indeed is the step China has taken. Up through the end of the previous administration, the Office of the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Affairs proceeded in its work on the assumption that negotiations between China and the Dalai Lama were feasible if China clearly understood the Dalai Lama's rejection of Tibetan independence.

At the same time, Tibet remains a focus of attention for several other reasons as well. As indicated above, the U.S. has oft-stated and well-justified human rights concerns with regard to Tibet. There is no doubt that imprisonment for dissenting political expression (most commonly with regard to Tibetan independence) and state pressure on religion, where there is a perception of a threat to state interests, remain serious matters. There is often an overlap between these concerns, as, for example, when loyalty to the Dalai Lama is at issue. Most recently Tibetan areas within the PRC have witnessed increasing restrictions on the activities of certain religious centers and religious figures (e.g., the 2001 closure and expulsions at Gser-thar).

Over the last two years China has embarked on a project designed to further the economic and social integration of the PRC's western regions with the rest of the country. This project, the "Great Western Development Initiative (*Xibu da kaifa*)," has its own implications for Tibet. It is important to note that while the project does seek to address the stark imbalance in development that characterizes the differences between areas such as Tibet and the wealthy coastal regions in eastern China, it also has the potential for spurring Chinese migration into Tibet and further Sinicization there. Given that one of the elements in this enterprise is the construction of a railway link to Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, this project could greatly alter the situation in Tibet. And given the nationalism at the core of Tibetan political activism, this project may well exacerbate tensions, particularly in Lhasa and other urban areas, where Chinese residents are an ever-growing majority of the population.

Ultimately U.S. policy must be based on what the actual facts about Tibet are, not what we might like them to be. These include the fact that the Tibet issue is at its core a nationalist issue, not one centered around the improvement of material conditions; and the fact that Chinese policy is not to seek a compromise with the Dalai Lama, but to await his death and install a new Chinese-educated Dalai Lama. China's handling of dissent in Tibet continues to be characterized by serious human rights violations. Until such time as China can deal with Tibetan dissent-nationalist, religious, cultural, etc.-in a manner commensurate with

international norms of respect for human rights, Tibet will be the focus of visible international concerns and demonstrations.