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**Statement of Tseten Wangchuk Sharlho**

In this statement, I provide a brief assessment of the current conditions for dialogue between Beijing and the Dalai Lama.<sup>[i]</sup> While I have been a broadcast journalist in the Tibetan service of the Voice of America since 1993, the comments I make today represent my personal opinion and do not reflect the views of the VOA.

**Background**

The current round of talks has ended a decade of protracted stalemate. After Tiananmen, China maintained a hardline policy on Tibet, a position exacerbated in part by the exiled Tibetan leadership's uneven commitment to engagement. However, as Beijing's political environment shifted through the 1990s and Sino-U.S. relations moved to the center of China's foreign policy, there was high level reconsideration the official policy of isolating the Dalai Lama from its broader strategy on Tibet. By early 1997, channels between Dharamsala and the Chinese leadership were quietly re-opened and three rounds of informal meetings laid the groundwork for Jiang Zemin's public acknowledgment in 1998 of the renewal of contacts.

While this initial foray into experimentation with contacts was abortive – due likely to institutional resistance to the policy of engagement and political rivalry within the elite leadership itself – the impetus to reverse the 1989 decision to isolate the Dalai Lama had nonetheless gained momentum. In the wake of the highly visible departures of Arjia Rinpoche and the young Karmapa – both key figures in China's national Tibetan elite – the official policy of excluding the Dalai Lama was formally overturned in 2001 at the Fourth Work Forum on Tibet. Within months of this decision, direct contacts were again re-established and the groundwork was laid for the current round of talks.

The ongoing experimentation with dialogue remains exploratory. Following the most recent visit in February of this year, Special Envoy Lodi Gyari acknowledged “major differences even in the approach in addressing the issue,” but described the proceedings as having resulted in “better and deeper understanding” of their mutual positions. While Dharamsala has maintained a cautiously optimistic stance toward the process, Beijing has sent mixed signals. Until recently, Chinese officials have been reticent to acknowledge the ongoing meetings at all. However, TAR deputy party secretary Jampa Phuntsog's recent public acknowledgement of the five rounds of talks with the Dalai Lama's envoys – as reported in the pro-Beijing Hong Kong publication *Wenhui Bao* and elsewhere – could indicate a shift in approach. Phuntsog commented that the atmosphere was favorable (*qifen bucuo*), and noted that while these contacts have not yet resulted in substantive negotiations, the door was open for more dialogue.

In light of this public ambivalence, how should the China's stance on the dialogue process be assessed? While prospects for a negotiated resolution to the Sino-Tibetan dispute remain remote, the current political and socio-economic conditions suggest that Beijing is likely to remain cautiously committed to the policy of engagement.

**Current Conditions**

There is no doubt that the international factor has played a key role in shaping the recent dynamics in the relationship between Beijing and the Dalai Lama. Since the exiled Tibetan leadership turned to the international community for support in 1987, foreign diplomatic and political opprobrium have been an important factor in altering Chinese perception of the dispute. However, it is doubtful that international pressure alone could have altered China's policy. A survey of the factors conditioning Beijing's policy

choices and political behavior in handling the so-called Tibet issue indicates that pressure to renew contacts with the Dalai Lama has come not only externally from the international arena, but also from domestic sources as well.

Chinese analysts and scholars of foreign affairs and international studies have in recent years begun pointing out the benefits of renewing contacts with the Dalai Lama from the standpoint of China's long-term strategic interests. In particular, it has been argued that Tibet constitutes a weak link in China's political system that will remain vulnerable to manipulation by hostile forces until resolved. Constructive engagement with the Dalai Lama, it is argued, would serve the dual purpose of removing an irritant in China's foreign relations while opening the door to the possibility of resolving the issue itself. The willingness of Chinese scholars and strategic analysts, in particular, to criticize hardline policies suggests that the internal pressure corresponds not to short-term political goals but rather to a reasoned and sober consideration of China's long-term interests.

This moderate position is in turn tied to growing concerns about the longer-term effects of the accelerated economic development program. Contrary to expectations, rapid economic expansion appears to be giving rise to widening disparities in wealth and a heightened sense of ethnic cleavage and dispossession among Tibetans. These socio-economic transformations raise questions about the sustainability of current conditions inside Tibet itself. The stability of the Tibetan region has been secured at an extraordinarily high cost and it is unclear what complex set of social and economic forces have been unleashed by this political driven investment.

The short run impact of this rapid economic growth has been to increase inequalities throughout the region. In particular, the startling increase in expenditure on the bureaucracy and administration has given rise to unprecedented affluence among Tibetan cadres, administrators, and other salaried government workers. But the dramatic rise in living standards among these elite, predominantly urban Tibetans, has only underscored the impoverishment of the overwhelming majority of Tibetans who remain rural, illiterate, and without access to rudimentary healthcare or primary education. The growing sense of dispossession engendered by the widening disparities in wealth is exacerbated by the continuing influx of Chinese migrants into Tibetan areas.

In addition to these key factors, a number of other structural changes could also potentially play a significant role in shaping Beijing's attitude toward talks with the Dalai Lama. One important development has been China's shifting global position. Fueled by rapid economic development, China's rise in international status could potentially cause Beijing to become increasingly impervious to international opprobrium. At the same time, however, China's growing confidence could also lead to a shift in the dominant Chinese framing of the Tibet issue. In fact, China's growing international stature has already prompted calls from Chinese strategists and public figures to abandon the narrative of victimhood that has long served as the filter for viewing China's place in the world, and to embrace instead a 'great power mentality.' The prevailing narrative of Chinese victimization has, until now, impaired the Chinese ability to view the Tibet issue objectively on its own terms. It is possible that a transformation in Chinese attitude could potentially create a political climate more conducive to constructive dialogue.

Another important structural change has been the ongoing shifts in regional strategic balance. In particular, India's growing prominence in south Asia is likely to affect China's strategic calculation in its strategy on Tibet. Regardless of whether India becomes an ally with the US 'in the cause of democracy' in opposition to China's regional power, or whether India and China form their own de facto geostrategic alliance to counterbalance the West, it is clear that the changing dynamics in the relationship between the two regional competitors will take center stage in the coming decade. In the process, Beijing's incentive to find a long-term resolution to the Tibet issue is likely to increase.

A third and striking development has been Beijing's institutional restructuring of its decision-making process in managing the Tibet issue. The management of the Tibet issue has become increasingly complex and institutionalized over the past twenty years. Many more stakeholders are now involved in the process of determining China's Tibet policy. The decision-making process includes a broad range of institutions, including the military, the foreign ministry, the Ministry of National Security, and the State Council Information Office. Through the involvement of these various institutions, there is now a more comprehensive information gathering system in place. Consequently, the Chinese leadership's access to information about the Dalai Lama and the Tibet issue in general has increased exponentially. There has also been a diversification of the sources of policy analysis from outside the government, as new research centers and thinktanks have begun to provide specialized opinions on Tibet. The effect of this increasing complexity is that the decision-making process is now more decentralized and plural. As this process has become more diffuse and a broader range of interests is represented, Chinese perspectives on the Dalai Lama and the Tibet issue have become more varied and competing interests have emerged.

At a bureaucratic level, the United Front's infrastructure for managing Tibetan affairs has become significantly more complex. As the Party organ formally charged with the task of establishing broad alliances with non-Party organizations and interest groups, the United Front is responsible for managing the affairs of all national minorities. Despite this formal mission, Tibetan affairs are being accorded an extraordinary share of the United Front's institutional resources. Above the United Front, a 'leading small group' has been established to coordinate high-level management of Tibetan affairs. The creation of this high-level interagency coordinating body points to the policy importance of Tibetan affairs for the Chinese leadership.<sup>[ii]</sup> In 2003, the foreign minister was also added to the membership of the group, a move that underlined the significance of the Tibet issue to China's foreign policy. The establishment of the leading small group indicates not only that Tibet is now regarded as a key policy issue, it also suggests that the senior leadership intends to manage the issue through an institutionalized process of broad and formal consultation. As with the expansion of the United Front's bureaucratic structure for handling Tibetan affairs, it is possible that this new form of high-level coordination will allow for less flexibility in the decision-making process on dialogue with the Dalai Lama, as Beijing's institutional management of the Tibet issue becomes increasingly more complex and considerably less predictable. Regardless of how this coordination proceeds, institutional factors will play a major role in shaping the process of dialogue to come.

## **Assessment**

Cumulatively, these disparate variables have had the effect of creating conditions more favorable to a strategy of engagement for Beijing. But while it seems likely that China will, for the time being, continue to pursue talks with the Dalai Lama, it seems equally unlikely that the two parties can expect to begin discussing matters of substance under present circumstances. For more than two decades of intermittent talks, Beijing and Dharamsala have remained in fundamental disagreement about the substance of what is - or should be - in dispute between them. The exiled Tibetan leadership has consistently raised two key issues in their efforts to open talks with Beijing: the need to find a solution for all Tibetan-inhabited areas (the 'unification,' or 'consolidation,' issue) and 'genuine autonomy.' For their part, the Chinese have been publicly adamant that there is no 'Tibet issue' for discussion. Rather, they have characterized the dispute as solely a matter of the Dalai Lama's personal return.

Thus, while there is momentum on both sides to continue simply to talk about talks, the question now for Beijing is whether its deferral of substantive negotiations risks forgoing an historic opportunity to reach a lasting solution on the dispute over Tibet. Current political realities in Beijing militate against acceding to Dharamsala's demands for meaningful autonomy. Unless the Tibet issue should erupt as a violent conflict, the factors pushing Beijing to negotiate are likely to be regarded as insufficiently compelling to justify the risks entailed. On the other hand, if the current talks break off, Beijing will be going it alone as it manages the chronic threat of ethnonationalist discontent.

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[\[i\]](#) For a more detailed assessment, see Tashi Rabgey and Tseten Wangchuk Sharlho, *Sino-Tibetan Dialogue in the Post-Mao Era: Lessons and Prospects* (Washington D.C.: East West Center, 2004).

[\[ii\]](#) Leading small groups have also been established for Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, as well as for national security. See Medeiros and Fravel (2003).