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Reassessing Tibet Policy

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The flight of the 17th Karmapa Lama from Tibet to India on the eve of the millenium catapulted Tibet back into world headlines. This has created an opportunity for both China and the U.S. to reassess their policies toward Tibet.

Tibet's status has been intertwined with China since the 7th century through marriages, wars, and treaties. Mongol conquests in the 13th century made Tibet part of a Mongol-ruled Chinese state, and four centuries later the ethnic Manchu Q'ing dynasty further incorporated Tibet into China. In 1912 the 13th Dalai Lama unilaterally declared independence but two years later indicated his willingness to sign a treaty granting Chinese "suzerainty" over both "Inner Tibet" and "Outer Tibet," establishing direct rule over the former and leaving the latter autonomous. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reestablished strong central government in 1949, Tibet was regarded as politically "integral" with China but in fact so autonomous that Beijing insisted on an incorporation "treaty" to preempt any claims of independence. Yet the CCP refrained from stamping out feudalism and theocratic rule. Twice in the 1950s, Mao Zedong assured the Dalai Lama that China would make no further inroads against de facto Tibetan autonomy. This policy, however, applied only to Outer Tibet, which was later renamed the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Other ethnic Tibetan areas, known as Amdo and Kham (Inner Tibet), underwent political transformation.

Key Points

- Tibet and China have been intertwined since the 7th century in one form or another.
- The Dalai Lama, now almost 65 years old, feels the pressure of time in his hopes to preserve Tibetan culture in his lifetime, making talks with Beijing and a compromise solution urgent.
- U.S. policy works against a solution to this dilemma because of its unrealistic portrayal of China.

This process of integration sparked rebellion, and minor insurrections in Kham/Sichuan turned into open revolt by 1956. Support soon came from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which was eager to destabilize the communist government. China's suppression of a 1959 revolt forced the Dalai Lama and 50-60,000 Tibetans into exile. Beijing then subjected the TAR to political and social integration, ending Lhasa's autonomous rule. During the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards, both Chinese and Tibetan, engaged in wholesale destruction of almost every religious building in Tibet, paralleling antireligious campaigns throughout China. From exile, the Dalai Lama oversaw refugee resettlement and guerrilla warfare—although he officially renounced all violence. CIA support encouraged insurgent Tibetans to continue their war for independence, but the CIA was more interested in harassing communist China than in promoting Tibetan independence. Following the 1971 visit to Beijing by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the U.S. cut off its support to the Tibetan resistance. The Tibetan rebellion quickly dissipated; after 15 years, the Tibetans had been unable to create a sustainable, freestanding military force.

By the late 1970s, China began relaxing its grip on Tibet. In 1978 the Panchen Lama was released from detention, and he began championing the preservation of Tibetan culture. A new round of Dalai Lama-Beijing contacts resulted in several Tibetan-exile delegations visiting Tibet. After these talks faltered in the 1980s, the Dalai Lama decided to promote his cause internationally, believing that increased foreign pressure generated by his "Tibet Lobby" would force Beijing to renew serious negotiations. Rising international attention and continued unrest in Tibet sparked a policy debate within China. The moderates argued for more freedom for Tibetan cultural practices and the return of the Dalai Lama, while the hard-liners (many of them Tibetan governmental and party officials) urged ending ties to the Dalai Lama and repressing all expressions of Tibetan nationalism.

After the Panchen Lama's sudden death in January 1989, the Dalai Lama was invited for religious funerary ceremonies in Beijing. Even though he was assured that there would be an opportunity for direct high-level talks, the Dalai Lama declined the invitation after his advisers objected to the continuing prohibition against his visiting Lhasa and pointed out that the international campaign was giving his cause increasing prominence. The decision not to go to Beijing and renew direct negotiations was probably the gravest error of his political life. He did, however, agree in 1992 with the Chinese leadership to recognize a 7-year-old boy from a nomad family as the reincarnation of the Karmapa Lama, and there was the suggestion that the Dalai Lama could assist in searching for the next Panchen Lama. But tensions escalated again in 1995 when the Dalai Lama (without first consulting Beijing) announced that a boy had been selected as the 11th Panchen Lama. The designee and his family were arrested, and Beijing enthroned its own candidate. Since then there has been no progress in Chinese-Dalai Lama relations.

U.S. policy has done little to help resolve the Tibet issue. Washington's policy ignores Tibet's complex history, is driven by domestic politics, and is inherently contradictory. While officially recognizing Tibet as part of China, the U.S. Congress and White House unofficially encourage the campaign for independence.

Problems With Current U.S. Policy

In 1943, Washington declared that "...the Government of the United States has borne in mind the fact that the Chinese Government has long claimed suzerainty over Tibet...This Government has at no time raised a question regarding ...these claims." In line with the policy of its Nationalist Chinese allies (the defeated Guomindang army that fled to Taiwan), the U.S. later officially recognized Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. This position remains U.S. policy, and it is also the policy of both China and Taiwan.

Not until the cold war did Tibet become of interest to the U.S. government, which initiated secret talks with Tibetan dissidents in 1950 on the premise that Tibetans were fighting communism, not Chinese rule. Washington promised covert aid to the Tibetan dissidents if the Dalai Lama would leave China and publicly denounce Beijing. At that time, the Dalai Lama refused to leave Tibet, and the CIA threw its covert support to a burgeoning guerrilla movement. In 1959 the Dalai Lama fled Tibet, and he immediately began receiving an annual U.S. stipend of $180,000 for himself and another $1,550,000 for his cause. Covert CIA funding presumably ended in 1971.

After 1971 U.S. interest in Tibet waned as relations with China warmed, but mounting pressure from the Tibet Lobby complicated the policy environment. In the late 1980s the Tibet Lobby found a receptive hearing with the U.S. Congress, whose members were angry at China over nuclear proliferation, trade imbalances, prison labor, and human rights. Hearings were held, and amendments were added to bills condemning "human rights violations" and calling Tibet an "occupied country." In September 1987, when the Dalai Lama was in the U.S. promoting the Tibet Lobby, the first demonstrations in three decades broke out in Lhasa. Undoubtedly expressions of U.S. "support" helped spur on the demonstrators, as Tibetans wrongly interpreted congressional testimony and nonbinding congressional resolutions as evidence of a changing U.S. policy. But official U.S. policy remained unaltered.

Pursuant to its early alliance with the Nationalists/Taiwan and to its subsequent relations with Beijing, Washington never recognized Tibetan independence (or the Dalai Lama's "government-in-exile," despite covert CIA support). But the vociferous U.S. opposition to communist China together with the rising popularity of the Dalai Lama's cause pressured the White House to open some space in its public diplomacy for the Tibetan issue, resulting in yet another irritant in Sino-U.S relations. Washington's failure to articulate a consistent and definitive policy has displeased all sides: anti-China politicians, the Tibet Lobby, and the Chinese. Moreover, Washington's ambivalence and equivocations have proved harmful to resident Tibetans.

During the 1980s, CCP moderates paved the way for increased usage of the Tibetan language, the reconstruction of religious buildings (with more temples in some regions now than before 1951), and the encouragement of Tibetan culture. But though CCP officials were willing to solidify these policies with the Tibetan pontiff, their inability to consummate a deal with Tibet's other religious leadership, the continuing popular protests, and the escalating China-bashing in the U.S. strengthened the hand of CCP hard-liners.

U.S. public diplomacy skirts the independence issue, focusing on criticism of human rights abuses. Yet recent concessions and overtures to the Tibet Lobby are seen as evidence by CCP hard-line factions that Washington's ultimate goal is to fracture China. Such initiatives as the establishment of Radio Free Asia (RFA), the 1998 appointment of a special coordinator for Tibet (a State Department employee who works part-time on Tibet and whom China will never allow into Tibet or to play any role in Chinese-Tibetan affairs), and invitations to the Dalai Lama to visit the White House have served to strengthen the anti-Dalai Lama, anti-U.S. positions of the hard-line CCP faction.

In recent years, this hard-line CCP faction has fostered increased repression in Tibet, outlawed pictures of the Dalai Lama, encouraged increased ethnic Chinese migration into Tibet, tightened security in monasteries, obstructed religious practices, and forced monks and Tibetan officials to undergo "patriotic" retraining. As a result, there has been rising animosity toward Chinese rule and increased expressions of Tibetan nationalism—including some terrorism, such as bombs in Lhasa. Indeed, these anti-Tibetan policies precipitated the flight of the 17th Karmapa, a 14-year-old boy, who had previously expressed loyalty to the Chinese state.

Restrictions on Tibetan culture, especially religion, were what led to the 1964 denunciation of Chinese rule by the Panchen Lama and his subsequent 14-year detention. Once more, repressive practices, which have been fueled in part by ill-considered U.S. practices, alienated a prominent cleric and precipitated his flight to India. In the offing, there remains the possibility that the CCP moderates can use this unfortunate development to illustrate the bankruptcy of the hard-line approach.

Key Problems

- Internationalization of the Tibet issue has worsened the situation inside Tibet by strengthening hard-line elements.
- The freedom to travel inside China has led to a huge influx of ethnic Chinese to urban centers in Tibet, and they now probably outnumber urban Tibetans.
- China, unclear perhaps of how to deal with the Dalai Lama, has continued to erect roadblocks to serious negotiations.

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Toward a New Foreign Policy

The departure of the Karmapa Lama should spur Washington to reevaluate the failures of its ambiguous policy approach. It is time—after a long history of CIA betrayal, congressional grandstanding, and White House pandering to China bashers—for the U.S. to implement policies that truly help resident Tibetans.

Sadly, the spiraling success of the international campaign for Tibet has led to a proportional deterioration in cultural conditions for the people of the TAR, since Tibet's high profile has bolstered the authority of the Chinese hard-liners. Moreover, publicity from outside Tibet (especially Tibetan RFA broadcasts) persuades some Tibetans that the U.S. supports their cause and encourages them to continue their brave but futile struggles against Chinese rule.

Key Recommendations

- The U.S. must recognize and acknowledge the major advances in personal freedoms that the vast majority of Chinese citizens now enjoy and must place human rights complaints in the larger context of current Chinese society.
- Washington, and especially Congress, must end its knee-jerk China bashing and portrayal of China as a major threat to the U.S.
- The U.S. must support and encourage those officials in China who recognize the problems that China has had with some of its ethnic minorities and are willing to work cooperatively to maintain the cultural integrity of the Tibetan people.

Time is short. The Dalai Lama is 65; his death would rob Tibetans of the only person with sufficient authority to negotiate a deal with Beijing. In the absence of a negotiated solution, current Chinese policies are allowing a mass migration of sojourners into the TAR to the point where they may already outnumber the indigenous population in the urban areas, where they congregate. The Dalai Lama, like his predecessor, is willing, as he declared in April 1999, to "use my moral authority with the Tibetan people so they renounce their separatist ambitions." He feels that autonomy would be the "best guarantee that Tibet's culture will be preserved."

China, including the TAR, has undergone dramatic changes. Tibet has roads, schools, hospitals, a burgeoning middle class, internet cafes, karaoke bars, discos, and some 100,000 tourists annually. Religion is widely practiced. There are thousands of Tibetan officials, CCP members, and military recruits in Tibet. Indeed, many of the most ardently anti-Dalai Lama officials are Tibetan. To be sure, restrictions on religious practice continue, institutional religion has eroded badly, the average income and literacy rate are the lowest in China, and animosity between ethnic groups is growing. There are as many as a thousand political prisoners, mostly clergy who peacefully demonstrated against Chinese rule. Clearly, the political conjuncture in Tibet is far more complex than either the Tibet Lobby or Chinese propaganda portrays.

Tibetan Buddhism

There are four religious teachings in Tibetan Buddhism, and the distinctions between them can sometimes be confusing. The largest, and most recent, is the Gelug (Yellow Hat), of which the Dalai Lama is the leader. The others (sometimes referred to collectively as Red Hat), in order of their membership, are the Nyingma (the oldest), Kagyu (the order with the Karmapa Lama, also known as the Black Hat Lama, and the Sharmapa Lama, also known as the Red Hat Lama), and Sakya. There are also numerous suborders. Their theological similarities are greater than their differences.

There is no official hierarchy of lamas. The Dalai Lama is the head of only one school, but he is considered by almost all Tibetans to be their foremost spiritual leader, although that does not mean they will all automatically obey every one of his instructions. Moreover, until 1959, he was also the theocratic head of the Tibetan government.

The Panchen Lama heads a Gelug Monastery (Tashilhumpo) in Tibet's second largest city, Shigatse, and is generally considered the second most important Tibetan cleric. The Karmapa Lama is often considered the third most influential lama.

Although it is important to condemn human rights abuses, Washington must also acknowledge the significant gains in personal freedoms for the vast majority of China's citizens. The Dalai Lama's public pronouncements have become more conciliatory recently; an indication that he is reaching out to moderate officials, who while apparently not directing policy regarding Tibet, are still in the government. The U.S. must do the same: support the moderate elements in the Chinese government by portraying Tibet in a more realistic fashion, by inviting Tibetan officials to visit Washington, and by not pandering to the Tibet Lobby.

The events of the past decade have demonstrated that public diplomacy, international hoopla, and the involvement of the world's governments, especially the United States, have worsened conditions for resident Tibetans. More realistic policies can help bring about a peaceful resolution of the Tibet issue, which is in the interests, and to the benefit, of Tibetans, Chinese, and, ultimately, the whole world.

A. Tom Grunfeld is a professor of history at SUNY/Empire State College. He is the author of The Making of Modern Tibet *(Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1996).*

* A shorter and somewhat different version of this article appeared in *Current History*, September 1999.

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Sources for More Information

Organizations

There are no neutral organizations pertaining to Tibet. The numerous organizations concerned with Tibet are openly anti-Chinese and serve largely as propaganda agencies for the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile. Human rights groups, such as Human Rights Watch, focus attention on the individuals who are indeed victims of human rights abuses, but since this repression is highly selective and not universal, their reports distort the overall picture of what is going on inside Tibet.

Publications

Melvyn C. Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet and the Dalai Lama* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

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Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

Articles in Journals

A. Tom Grunfeld, "The Question of Tibet," *Current History* 98:629, September 1999.

Isabel Hilton, "Flight of the Lama," *New York Times Magazine*, March 12, 2000.

Barry Sautman, "The Tibet Question: Meeting the Bottom Lines," *Problems of Post-Communism* 44:3, May-June 1997.

World Wide Web Sites

As with organizations, there are no websites that are not politically committed to the cause of the Dalai Lama.

The best overall site for all things Asian is:
Asian Studies WWW Virtual Library
http://coombs.anu.edu.au
/WWWVL-AsianStudies.html

For another site that collects information pertaining to Tibet, see:
Tibet Information Network
http://www.tibetinfo.net/index.html

For articles onTibet appearing in world press:
World Tibet News Archive
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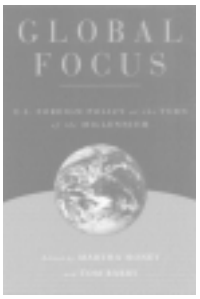

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