

Historical Background Handout

excerpt from "Reassessing Tibet Policy"

Volume 5, Number 9
April 2000

Written by A. Tom Grunfeld, Empire State College
Editors: [Tom Barry](#) (IRC) and [Martha Honey](#) (IPS)

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.

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.

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.

<http://www.fpif.org/briefs/vol5/v5n09tibet.html>