The Sino-Tibetan Dialogue

_Talk Shop or Path to Resolution?_

Rene Kamm

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Marc Blecher, _advisor_
Oberlin College
East Asian Studies Honors
2012 April 26
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Preface

This thesis represents a personal journey. I was born in 1990—one month after my father first asked a Chinese government official to free a political prisoner, and began his own journey to save the lives of prisoners of conscience in China. An important outcome of that effort was the medical parole of Takna Jigme Sangpo in 2002. I was 11 years old at the time. As I moved into middle school, then high school, and now college, I wondered why my father had sacrificed a successful business career to work on Tibet’s cause, and the cause of human rights in China.

This past summer, I spent several weeks in a Tibetan monastery in Rikon, Switzerland. There, I studied the Tibetan language, culture and religion, and also had the opportunity to meet the 85-year-old Jigme Sangpo, who has political asylum in Switzerland and lives at the monastery. He witnessed firsthand the changes brought about by the “Peaceful Liberation” of 1951, the flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959, the Cultural Revolution and the 1987-89 protests, as well as the leaderships of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang, and Jiang Zemin.

Though his English and my Tibetan were limited, I came to better understand the deep feelings that Sangpo had for Tibet. I learned a great deal from the monks as well, and had the chance to attend several gatherings held by the Rikon local chapter of the Central Tibetan Administration (formerly the Tibetan Government-in-Exile). I consulted academics and policymakers specializing on the Tibet question, including not only Tibetans but Americans and Europeans as well. I was granted rare interviews with senior Chinese officials. And I sought an answer to one key question: *What degree of autonomy for Tibet is realistically achievable in a new world largely defined in terms of China’s rise, a world in which international criticism weighs far less in the minds of Chinese leaders than the imperatives of holding on unchallenged to the reins of power?*
This thesis examines the ebbs and flows of the relationship between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama with regard to resolving the Tibet question; it also attempts to develop a realistic assessment of prospects for greater autonomy in the coming near future. It does so through a chronological account that tracks past forms of autonomy in Tibet, explores the roles of distrust, memory and rhetoric in negotiations, and analyzes the dynamics of Beijing’s Tibet policy with regard to international pressure and internal Party politics.

Introduction

The Tibet question is a dispute between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama that concerns the representation of the six million Tibetans living in China. It is a profoundly unbalanced dispute, involving what is generally recognized as the fastest-rising economic and military power of the 20th and 21st centuries on the one hand, and a respected though aging spiritual leader whose exile administration has never been recognized by a single foreign government on the other. It is a protracted dispute that riveted the world’s attention as a pressing human rights issue in the wake of violent protests in 1989 and 2008. And it is a dispute that the Dalai Lama has sought to resolve through a negotiated settlement that achieves a greater degree of autonomy for Tibet for the purpose of preserving Tibetans’ unique language, culture and religion.

For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the dispute about Tibet’s rule has been resolved since at least 1951 when the Dalai Lama and his government signed the Seventeen-Point Agreement, thereby accepting Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. The agreement provided for a considerable degree of autonomy to the local Tibetan government, and directly acknowledged
the role of the Dalai Lama vis-à-vis the CCP. However, this arrangement collapsed when resistance from Tibetans in Sichuan Province spread, culminating in the 1959 Uprising in Lhasa that led to the Dalai Lama’s flight to India.

While both sides renounced the Seventeen-Point Agreement in 1959, the basic nature of Chinese rule in Tibet has not changed: the People’s Republic of China (PRC) enforces sovereignty over Tibet and its policy provides the region with autonomy. Since 1951, the principal rationale guiding Beijing’s Tibet policy has been the CCP’s determination to secure its unchallenged authority in the region—that is, to establish itself as the sole governing body in Tibet.

Beijing places a tremendous amount of economic and strategic value in Tibet. Official Chinese sources use the term “Tibet,” or “Xizang,” to refer to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), the central and western areas of the Tibetan plateau directly under the control of the Dalai Lama and his government prior to 1951. \[1\] “Xizang” literally translates to “western treasure house,” which signifies the region’s vast resources of water, gold, iron ore, and other metals and minerals. Moreover, as China’s westernmost region, Tibet borders India, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. It is also close to Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, which can be perceived through the post-Cold War lens as key territories in America’s push for power in the oil-rich Middle East, from which China imports a large percentage of the crude oil that fuels its economic growth.

For the CCP, autonomy is secondary to sovereignty, though at times, the Party has perceived the granting of a greater degree of autonomy to be ancillary to securing sovereignty. A core argument of this thesis is that Beijing has been more accommodating to the Dalai Lama’s

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\[1\] This paper uses the term “Tibet” similarly – to represent the central and western areas under the Dalai Lama and his government’s jurisdiction prior to 1951, or the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) – except in the “Background” section, in which the term “Tibet” refers to the entire Tibetan plateau. For the rest of the thesis, I indicate when that definition is broadened by specifically invoking Kham, Amdo, or their Chinese provincial counterparts of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan.
representations for greater autonomy during periods when the Party was focused on reinforcing its popular mandate in Tibet and improving people’s livelihoods to establish its unchallenged sovereignty broadly; on the other hand, domestic instability and concerted foreign pressure – periods when the Party perceived its grip on power to be threatened – have induced Beijing to become less accommodating to the Dalai Lama and more intractable in its Tibet policy.

**Background (Pre-1951)**

China and Tibet’s political relationship dates back to the 13th century, when the Mongols of the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) formally incorporated Tibet into its central administration through the establishment of an institution that directly managed Tibet’s political and military affairs.\(^1\) During the Yuan and the subsequent Ming dynasties, Tibet and China shared a “priest-patron” relationship: Tibet’s lama provided religious instruction and performed rites and divinations, while the Mongolian khan protected and advanced the interests of the lama. However, unlike the Yuan, the ethnically Chinese Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) exerted no administrative authority over Tibet.

Similarly, the Manchurian Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) did not exercise any administrative authority in the region at first. However, the Qing followed the political precedent set during the Ming that officially recognized the Dalai Lama’s political and religious authority over Tibet. After the 5th Dalai Lama’s death in 1682, a power struggle broke out between his regent and a Mongol leader, Lobsang Khan, who eventually won political control of Tibet with the support of the Qing emperor.
In 1705, the Qing emperor recognized Khan as the ruler of a Tibet under Chinese protection, and in exchange, Tibet paid regular tribute to the imperial court in Beijing. In 1717, the Qing emperor dispatched troops to stabilize a Tibet that had been invaded by hostile Mongolian forces. The Qing then decided to create a protectorate over Tibet to enforce its dynastic interests, initiating a series of reforms that sought to stabilize as well as consolidate authority over the territory.

One such measure was the decision to station two Manchu imperial residents, or ambans, in Lhasa to oversee the Tibetan leaders. Another was the establishment of the Kashag cabinet and the 1751 appointment of the Dalai Lama to administer this cabinet. This political and administrative structure became the local government of Tibet, which more or less functioned in this capacity until the Dalai Lama and the Kashag government went into exile in 1959. The Qing also strengthened its authority by reducing the size of Tibet proper, placing certain areas in Kham under the jurisdiction of Sichuan and Yunnan.

In 1793, after expelling Nepalese invaders, the Qing reorganized the Tibetan Kashag government through a written plan called the “Twenty-Nine Regulations for Better Government in Tibet.” The reform package included stipulations for the selection process for top incarnations such as the Dalai and Panchen Lamas. Through these policy initiatives, the Qing Dynasty established China as Tibet’s suzerain: it would protect the region from external and internal conflict, and would allow the Tibetan leaders it approved of to rule a Tibet that was not against Qing interests.

The expansion of British influence on the Indian subcontinent led to a 1904 invasion of Tibet by British expeditionary forces. To secure the withdrawal of the British troops, the Dalai Lama signed the Anglo-Tibet Convention. However, the Qing amban refused to sign the
agreement. Subsequently, the convention was redrafted and modified to terms acceptable to the Qing, which reaffirmed Tibet’s political subordination to China.

The British invasion of Tibet was one of many humiliating episodes that spelled out the demise of the Chinese empire at the hands of Western imperialism. The two Opium Wars resulted in China’s loss of Hong Kong and the Kowloon Peninsula; the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 ended in the loss of Taiwan; foreign territorial concessions were granted to the United Kingdom, Germany and France, and the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 ended when a Western multinational army marched into Beijing.

Many Han Chinese blamed the ethnically Manchurian Qing Dynasty for subverting the glory of the Middle Kingdom, and in 1911, organized to overthrow the invasive dynasty. The events and circumstances that led to the end of dynastic rule in China remain engrained in the Chinese collective and political consciousness. They affected, and continue to affect, the nationalist and communist officials’ wary approach to foreign governments. Moreover, British attempts to establish control over Tibet in the 19th and early 20th centuries reinforced Chinese suspicions of Western imperialist campaigns that sought to destroy China’s territorial integrity and sovereignty.

In 1913, the British convoked a conference in Simla, India for the purpose of clarifying Tibet’s status, which the newly constituted Republic of China (ROC) and the Tibetan government disputed. The 1912 ROC Provisional Constitution declared Tibet an integral part of the Chinese state, and the PRC State Council Information Office cites this as evidence of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet during the years of nationalist rule. In 1913, the ROC telegraphed the 13th Dalai Lama with a message that restored to him the former title he held under Qing rule. However, the Dalai Lama rejected this offer, declaring his intention “to exercise
both temporal and ecclesiastic rule in Tibet.⁵ Although this statement could be interpreted as a declaration of independence, the Dalai Lama was unable to obtain any acknowledgement of independence either from the ROC or the international community.

Tibet sought to use the Simla conference to declare its independence. However, the Chinese forcefully asserted its claim over the territory. The resultant Simla Convention of 1914 declared that Tibet would be autonomous from China, but also acknowledged Chinese suzerainty over Tibet. While Tibet and Britain both signed the convention, the Chinese refused, stating that Tibet had no authority to sign the accord in the first place. Signing the document would have meant an acknowledgement of Tibetan sovereignty. Thus, the events at Simla affirmed Chinese suzerainty over the region and reflected Britain’s unwillingness to recognize Tibet’s independence.

Nonetheless, from 1913 when the Qing presence in Tibet dissolved entirely, to the death of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1933, no Chinese officials or troops resided in Tibet, and the Tibetan Kashag government ruled uninhibited by Beijing.⁶ In this way, China exercised de jure suzerainty over Tibet, while Tibet enjoyed de facto independence.

The above-mentioned political circumstances, especially those of the early 20th century, laid the groundwork for China’s historical claim to Tibet. The PRC contends that, according to international law and the succession of states theory, all subsequent Chinese governments have succeeded the Yuan Dynasty in exercising de jure sovereignty over Tibet.

At the same time, the history of Tibet’s status, especially the period of de facto independence from 1912 to 1951, has served to affirm the uniqueness of Tibet, and also formed the basis of Tibetans’ aspirations for independence. The outbreak of the Pacific War in 1937, and the subsequent Chinese Civil War, saved Tibet from having to defend its de facto independence...
from China until 1949, when Mao Zedong formally established the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

**The Peaceful Liberation and Breakdown (1951–1959)**

With the founding of the PRC, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) primary goal was to consolidate its authority and legitimacy as the sole ruling party of China. It sought to achieve this by stabilizing the country, which had been ravaged by two decades of war, and by restoring its territorial integrity. Mao Zedong perceived Tibet to be crucial to accomplishing these ends, and in 1950, declared the liberation of the territory to be one of the CCP’s major goals.

Mao understood the unparalleled power and influence that the Dalai Lama wielded, and as such, wanted China’s claim to Tibet legitimized through the Dalai Lama’s acceptance of Chinese sovereignty. Moreover, in keeping one eye to the past era of instability and one eye to the way in which the new Cold War world order was playing out in Taiwan and Korea, Mao understood that embroiling China in a violent conflict with Tibet would severely hamper the development of the PRC. He therefore sought to establish Chinese sovereignty over Tibet at the negotiating table.

On the other hand, the Tibetan government sought to assert its independence, but found little support from Britain or the US. After granting independence to India in 1947, Britain had no interest in defending Tibet’s status for buffering purposes. And the Americans were fearful that encouraging Tibetan independence would lead to a Chinese invasion of Tibet, which could potentially entrench the US in a war it did not want to fight. The Western democracies’
unwillingness to support Tibetan independence led the Tibetan government to begin the process of negotiations with the CCP in February 1950.

For several months, the dialogue yielded no progress as the Tibetan government balked at sending a delegation to Beijing for talks. In September, a Tibetan delegation met with the Chinese ambassador to India in Delhi. At the meeting, the Chinese ambassador stated that China could never accept Tibetan independence, and offered a three-point proposal for Chinese integration, which the Tibetans subsequently rejected.¹ The Tibetans continued to vacillate and missed the Chinese-issued deadline to send a negotiating team to Beijing, causing the CCP to abandon the dialogue and adopt a military solution. On October 6, 1950, the Chinese launched a full-scale military operation into Tibet.

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) handily defeated the Tibetan forces on its way towards Lhasa. However, Mao halted the military’s advance for the purpose of bringing the Tibetan government to the negotiating table in order to broker a political settlement, affirming Mao’s commitment to establishing the CCP’s legitimacy in Tibet through the Dalai Lama’s endorsement. On May 23, 1951, the Chinese and Tibetan governments signed the Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet.

The Seventeen-Point Agreement was the first formal written agreement acknowledging Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. The Agreement granted Tibet the right to exercise national regional autonomy and to maintain its traditional political-economic system, including the institution of the Dalai Lama, until the Tibetan people called for reforms.² The Seventeen-Point Agreement therefore required the CCP to win the approval of the Dalai Lama, or the Tibetan people whom he represented, in order to institute any socialist reforms, such as land redistribution. Tibetologist Melvyn Goldstein highlights this as an element of Mao’s “gradualist”
Tibet policy, which served “to allay Tibetan anxieties so that Tibet’s elite would over time genuinely accept ‘reintegration’ with China and agree to a societal transformation.”

In this way, the Seventeen-Point Agreement reflected the lynchpin of Beijing’s Tibet policy after 1951: to consolidate, legitimize, and secure the CCP’s authority in the region. To this end, the CCP stationed Chinese representatives in Lhasa and dissolved the Tibetan army, integrating it into the PLA. The presence of the PLA, the dissolution of the Tibetan army, and the influx of Han cadres were all sources of growing anti-Chinese resentment in Tibet. However, the degree of autonomy granted to the Tibetan Kashag government, the safeguarding of Tibet’s religious institutions, and the preservation of the Dalai Lama’s leadership, which were all provided for in the Seventeen-Point Agreement, alleviated fears of assimilation. Moreover, the Dalai Lama's endorsement of and cooperation with the CCP checked anti-government sentiment among the Tibetan people.

In an effort to undermine the Tibetan leadership and the Dalai Lama’s political power, the CCP inaugurated the Preparatory Committee for the eventual establishment of the Autonomous Region of Tibet (PCART) in April 1956. The PCART divided the local government of Tibet into three political bodies: the Tibetan Kashag government, represented by the Dalai Lama; the Panchen Lama and his followers; and the Chamdo Liberation Committee (CLC). The PCART gave the same status and power of the Dalai Lama to the Panchen Lama as well as the CLC, which was entirely controlled by the CCP. Thus, the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama’s inability to cooperate effectively, coupled with the CLC’s top-down efficiency, simultaneously weakened Tibetan leadership and consolidated China’s power base in Lhasa.

In Tibetan areas outside of Tibet proper, Mao adopted very different policies because he was not bound by any formal agreement like the Seventeen-Point Agreement. Mao launched full-
scale political reforms in Tibetan areas such as Kham, in eastern Sichuan Province, and Amdo, in Qinghai Province. These reforms fundamentally restructured the Tibetan political, economic and religious systems, and irrevocably altered the lives of the Khampas and nomads of Amdo, who had traditionally owned their land. Beginning in 1954, an increasing number of Tibetan refugees from Kham and Amdo arrived in Lhasa with stories of Communist attacks on their livelihoods and the Tibetan culture and religion.⁶

In early 1956, a major rebellion broke out in Kangding (Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province). The PLA easily put down the rebels, but a low-level insurgency ensued. As Kham refugees fled Kangding, the rebellion began spilling into surrounding Tibetan areas. Despite popular opposition and appeals from Tibetan leaders, the CCP continued the political reforms, inciting further opposition from local Tibetans. Moreover, the PLA’s tactics for suppressing the revolts became more brutal and coercive, and also better known, which only served to increase the numbers of the Tibetan rebels.

By the beginning of 1959, the situation in Tibet was dire. Revolts had spread throughout all Tibetan areas and the PLA was on full alert. Anti-Chinese sentiment was rampant across all segments of the population. And the Tibetan Kashag government in Lhasa, under the leadership of the Dalai Lama, was fragmented, untrusting, and unable to make decisions. As Goldstein writes, “rather than try to reach an accommodation with the Chinese, [Tibetan officials] created unpleasant conditions in Lhasa, especially food shortages, as leverage to persuade the Chinese to withdraw.”⁷

Officials in the Tibetan Kashag government were extremely suspicious of CCP attempts to strengthen ties with the Dalai Lama, whose approval was definitively bound to Beijing’s Tibet policy through the Seventeen-Point Agreement. Thus, when the CCP informed the Kashag
government on March 9, 1959 that the Dalai Lama would be attending a ceremony the following
day in PLA headquarters, and that they would be in charge of his security, Tibetan officials
became alarmed.

According to historian Tsering Shakya, some Tibetan officials feared that the Chinese
were planning the abduction of the Dalai Lama, and spread word to that effect amongst the
Tibetan masses, invoking the recently foretold Tibetan prophesy that the Dalai Lama should not
exit his palace. On March 10, 1959, thousands of Tibetan civilians surrounded the Dalai Lama’s
palace to prevent him from leaving or being removed. The gathering quickly erupted into a
protest against the government, which then turned violent. Attacks were not only directed
towards the CCP, but also towards the Tibetan ruling elite who Tibetans believed had betrayed
the Dalai Lama and colluded with the CCP.

The anti-government protest soon became a pro-independence struggle as Lhasa
inhabitants openly declared Tibet’s independence and set up barricades in preparation for
conflict with the Chinese armed forces. On March 17, the Dalai Lama fled his palace in Lhasa,
and on March 19, the Chinese began shelling his summer palace, signaling the start of the “1959
Uprising,” which was subsequently put down by the stronger and better organized Chinese forces
within two days.

In exile, the Dalai Lama renounced the Seventeen-Point Agreement and began
campaigning for Tibetan independence. The Chinese government also renounced the Seventeen-
Point Agreement and terminated the Tibetan Kashag government in Lhasa. Thus came the end to
an era of coexistence between the Dalai Lama and the CCP: a relatively stable and peaceful
period in which China allowed Tibet to exercise autonomy through the institutions of the Dalai
Lama and the Kashag government. The renunciation of the Seventeen-Point Agreement
symbolized the ultimate failure of this coexistence, and represented the first clear manifestation of a fundamental distrust that has plagued all attempts at reconciliation between the Dalai Lama and the CCP since then.


For Beijing, the Tibetan uprising and the flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959 were signs that Mao’s gradual integrationist policy had ultimately failed. This led to the adoption of a policy that veered towards bringing Tibet into line with the rest of China. With the dissolution of the local Tibetan *Kashag* government and the renunciation of the Seventeen-Point Agreement, the CCP was now the sole governing body in Tibet, and could institute the socialist reforms that were already underway in the rest of China.

The Great Leap Forward ushered in a new era in which the traditional Tibetan way of life was fundamentally and irrevocably altered. From 1959 to 1962, the Great Leap Forward transformed Tibet’s traditional farming and nomadic areas into communes. During this period, food shortages were widespread, although Tibet’s agricultural production increased on the whole. Perceived attacks on Tibetans’ livelihoods, culture and religion compounded the anti-government sentiment that had spiked during the 1959 Uprising. However, a direct result of the uprising was the CCP’s decision to strengthen the security presence in Tibet, which acted as a significant curb to outright dissent and protest during the Maoist era.

Continued attacks on Chinese forces at the hands of Tibetan rebels further increased the amount of PLA troops in the restive region. This, in turn, led to a strengthening of India’s military in its northern frontiers and along the McMahon line. Like the ROC government before
it, the CCP contested the validity of the McMahon line’s origins: the Simla Convention of 1914. Acknowledging the Simla Convention would have signaled an acknowledgement of the Tibetan Kashag government’s right to self-determination, and would have rendered the Peaceful Liberation of 1951 to be an invasion of a sovereign nation. As the Dalai Lama noted from exile in 1959, “If you deny sovereign status to Tibet, you deny the validity of the Simla Convention and therefore deny the validity of the McMahon line.”

Chinese and Indian forces clashed in September 1962, when the PLA made a decisive move across the contested McMahon line. The Sino-Indian War ended one month later when the Chinese declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew back across the McMahon line. The defeat humiliated India and signaled a shift in New Delhi’s policy towards the PRC and the Dalai Lama. The new policy encouraged Tibetans to organize themselves, and ultimately led to the establishment of a government-in-exile in Dharamsala.

This was a major boost to the exiled Dalai Lama and his Kashag government, which had sought international support for its claim to Tibetan independence and sovereignty. Their efforts were initially successful, garnering two UN resolutions with language that supported the Tibetan people’s “right to self-determination.” The US helped raise the Tibet issue in the UN, and the CIA funded the exile Tibetan’s law firm. Moreover, beginning with the suppression of the Kham rebellion, the CIA assisted the Tibetan guerilla forces in establishing a base of operations in Nepal from which they conducted military raids into Tibet. Clandestine US support for the Tibetan rebels beginning in 1957 encouraged the Tibetan Kashag government’s aspirations for independence both before and after the events of 1959.

For the CCP, international support for the Tibetan exiles confirmed many cadres’ suspicions of a concerted campaign to undermine and split the PRC. This, coupled with the
Party’s intrinsic goal to entrench itself as the legitimate ruling party of China, affirmed Beijing’s disavowal of Mao’s former “gradualist” Tibet policy, and in turn, strengthened Beijing’s commitment to a less flexible policy that provided zero autonomy to the region. In a way, Beijing’s suspicions were correct: US foreign policy during the Cold War was primarily guided by NSC-68, a document that centered American interests on weakening the Communist bloc and aiding allies who shared ideals of democracy and freedom, such as the Tibetan exile project.

However, American support for the Dalai Lama and his exile government waned in the late 1960s when relations between the PRC and Soviet Russia worsened, and the US made the strategic decision to establish rapprochement with China. Beginning in 1966, the US stopped referring to self-determination for Tibet. And after Kissinger’s 1971 visit to Beijing, the CIA cut off its support to the Tibetan rebels. Thus, in the years after 1959, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile could not garner the international support needed in its fight for self-determination. Moreover, its efforts did nothing to impact the situation inside Tibet.

1966 marked the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Campaigns such as the “Four Olds” placed Tibetan religion and culture under attack, and destroyed over six thousand monasteries. Class struggle sessions and propaganda contradicted Tibetans’ traditional values and beliefs. Purges, violent factional struggles, and cultural devastation were widespread, directly or indirectly affecting all of China’s population. The personality cult of Mao permeated all levels of Chinese society, and in Tibet, firmly supplanted the Dalai Lama as the central figure in society. Moreover, Mao Zedong Thought was the central operative guide to everything from daily life to political initiatives, which further consolidated Mao’s power within the CCP leadership and the rest of Chinese society.
In brief, in the period directly following the flight of the Dalai Lama, Tibetans suffered substantial privation and their traditional way of life was irrevocably damaged. The influx of Han Chinese migrants, religious destruction, and political repression symbolized through the absence of autonomy – a degree of which Tibet had enjoyed through the presence of the Dalai Lama – intensified anti-government and anti-Chinese sentiment amongst the Tibetan populace. However, the diminishment of international support for independence, the Dalai Lama’s inability to affect any sort of influence inside Tibet, and the consolidation of Mao and the CCP’s power all contributed to a growing sense of hopelessness that Tibet could neither return to the era of *de facto* independence before 1951 nor to the period between 1951 and 1959 of greater autonomy under Chinese rule.


On September 9, 1976, Mao Zedong died, marking the end of an era in which China progressed in many respects, though at the cost of many lives. The penultimate period of Mao’s reign, the Cultural Revolution, devastated and divided the nation as well as the CCP leadership. His passing created a vacuum of power at the apex of the CCP leadership, which now sought to reestablish its authority and legitimacy in a country that widely distrusted and was dissatisfied with the government.

Less than a month after Mao’s death, the CCP under Hua Guofeng’s leadership arrested Mao’s widow Jiang Qing and her allies, and made the “Gang of Four” the scapegoats for China’s ills. In an effort to coalesce the Party, Hua pardoned the disgraced Deng Xiaoping and elevated him to the position of Vice Chairman. Hua’s insistence on carrying out the Maoist line and
Deng’s ability to mobilize support within the Party for his pragmatic reform initiatives eventually led to Deng supplanting Hua to become the paramount leader of the PRC, ushering in a new era that would produce a major shift in economic policy, the normalization of relations with the US, and renewed efforts to reconcile the Tibet issue.

While the CCP did not immediately introduce new policy initiatives for Tibet, it made a number of unilateral gestures to the international community for the purpose of proving its sincerity in dealing with Tibet, which had attracted unfavorable press as a sensitive international issue due to the presence of the Dalai Lama in India. On the day of Mao’s funeral, the American Defense Secretary James Schlesinger was allowed to begin a three-day tour of Tibet. In the past, foreign visits to Tibet had been confined to leaders of friendly third-world countries, and Schlesinger was certainly the most important political figure to visit Tibet.¹

In 1978, the CCP began releasing former Tibetan government officials imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution, such as the 10th Panchen Lama. In 1979, the Party began allowing Tibetans to travel to India to visit their relatives, and also invited Tibetans living abroad to open businesses in Tibet.

Moreover, the CCP revived the United Front Work Department, which had been neglected during the Cultural Revolution. The role of the UFWD was to find common ground with those who were not members of the CCP for the purpose of promoting the unity of China. The UFWD has been instrumental in discussions with the Dalai Lama ever since 1951, when its director led negotiations with the Tibetan Kashag government that resulted in the Seventeen-Point Agreement.

These initial moves in the post-Mao era laid the groundwork for Beijing’s reformed Tibet policy, which sought to enhance the Party’s legitimacy by securing the return of the Dalai Lama.
to China. Gestures of goodwill demonstrated the CCP’s sincerity in opening negotiations with the Dalai Lama.

At the end of 1978, the CCP contacted the Dalai Lama’s brother, Gyalo Thondup, in Hong Kong and conveyed the message that Deng Xiaoping was prepared to meet to discuss the problem of Tibet. The Dalai Lama approved his brother’s trip to Beijing, and in March 1979, Thondup met with UFWD director Ulanhu. Ulanhu then took Thondup to see Deng, who told the Tibetan leader that aside from independence, the CCP was willing to discuss all Tibetan grievances. Furthermore, Deng assured Thondup that the new leadership was committed to promoting fundamental changes, and that if the Dalai Lama had any doubts about the sincerity of the reforms, he was welcome to send a delegation to investigate the situation in Tibet.²

The Dalai Lama saw this initial proposal as an acceptable starting point for dialogue. Moreover, he could not afford to ignore this conciliatory gesture due to growing international support for Deng and his reform initiatives. Therefore, the Dalai Lama reciprocated by sending a fact-finding delegation from Dharamsala to Tibet in August 1979. The CCP allowed the delegation to tour not just the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), but all Tibetan areas. The delegation toured for six months, and was overwhelmingly welcomed by Tibetans wherever it visited.

Dharamsala conducted a second fact-finding delegation in May 1980. Historian Tsering Shakya records that, during each visit to a Tibetan neighborhood, “major anti-Chinese demonstrations [took place] with people openly shouting slogans demanding Tibetan independence.”³ Embarrassed, the CCP canceled the delegation while it was still in Lhasa, and the Tibetan exile delegates returned to Dharamsala. Tibetans’ enthusiastic reception of the
delegations proved to Dharamsala that the situation inside Tibet remained dire. The Dalai Lama could now confidently rebuff any Chinese claims about social and economic progress in Tibet.

For the CCP, the Tibetans’ response to the delegations proved just how influential the Dalai Lama was. In the early years of the reform era after 1976, the notion emerged within the Party leadership that the sovereignty it sought to secure in Tibet was at least partly contingent on the acceptance of Chinese rule by Tibetans. The recognition of the Dalai Lama’s influence amongst Tibetans thus reaffirmed the CCP’s commitment to securing the Dalai Lama’s return to China as a means of solving the Tibet issue. The CCP viewed Dharamsala’s fact-finding delegations as a debacle that strengthened the Dalai Lama’s negotiating hand, but one from which they could benefit by adopting a more liberal Tibet policy.

In February 1980, Deng elevated one of his strongest supporters, Hu Yaobang, to the position of Party Secretary. Hu’s first task was to create a five-man working committee on Tibet, which he himself chaired. In May 1980, he made an unprecedented visit to Lhasa in order to directly observe conditions in Tibet and determine a course of action for reforms. Prior to his arrival, Hu dismissed Ren Rong as party secretary of the TAR and replaced him with Yin Fatang. Hu’s observations of the impoverished state of Tibet stunned him, and he immediately ordered changes. His acknowledgment of Tibetan grievances and the appointment of Yin Fatang were clear messages that the reforms were not transitory and that the CCP was undertaking their efforts sincerely.

In 1981, Hu publicly announced a liberal six-point reform program for Tibet. He emphasized the necessity of a thorough realization of Tibet’s theoretical status as an autonomous region, and defined autonomy as self-government “under the unified leadership of the central people’s government.” Concretely, this autonomy provided for the promotion of the Tibetan
culture, language and education, and for the appointments of a majority of ethnic Tibetan cadres in the local TAR government.

The CCP continued to seek rapprochement with the Dalai Lama, whose acquiescence it viewed as essential to securing its legitimacy in the TAR and whose presence in India continued to undermine China’s rising international stature. In a July 1981 meeting with Gyallo Thondup, Hu Yaobang submitted a five-point proposal for the Dalai Lama’s return to China. The five points were:

1. The Dalai Lama should recognize that China has now entered a new period of stability and economic change.
2. The Dalai Lama should not raise the history of repression that followed the 1959 rebellion.
3. The Chinese Government sincerely welcomes the Dalai Lama and his followers to return to the motherland.
4. The Dalai Lama would have the same status as he had enjoyed before 1959. But it would be necessary that he should not live in Tibet or hold any position in Tibet. He may visit Tibet as often as he likes.
5. When the Dalai Lama returns, he may make press statements and appoint a suitable minister.5

In 1982, the CCP met with a delegation from Dharamsala to discuss the five-point proposal. The delegation sought to discuss more than just the Dalai Lama’s return, and submitted a new proposal that demanded the unification of all ethnically Tibetan areas under a single political and administrative entity. The Chinese bluntly rejected the Dalai Lama’s proposal, indicating that the only basis of negotiations were Hu’s five points.

The CCP believed that it did not need to compromise with the Dalai Lama because the new reforms appeared to be working towards alleviating Tibetans’ grievances. In July 1982, the Panchen Lama visited the TAR for the first time since 1964 and endorsed Beijing’s new policies. And in February 1983, the Dalai Lama unexpectedly announced that he hoped to visit Tibet in 1985 “if the present trend of improving the situation in Tibet continues in the right direction.”6
In early 1984, the CCP convened the Second Tibet Work Forum in Beijing. In order to bring the pace of economic development in Tibet in line with the rest of China, Beijing initiated “the opening of Tibet,” which would bolster the tourism industry in Tibet, loosen restrictions on Chinese migration into the region for business and trade, and inject money into the Tibetan economy through various infrastructure projects.

The Forum also reaffirmed the Party’s commitment to rapprochement with the Dalai Lama, and ensured greater autonomy and more religious freedom for Tibet. Negotiations with the Dalai Lama would remain grounded in the 1981 five-point proposal. During the Forum, Hu remarked that the success of these economic development initiatives would counter the Dalai Lama’s ability to agitate for greater freedom.7

Nonetheless, the Chinese were dissatisfied with the progress of negotiations with the Dalai Lama. In 1984, TAR Party Secretary Yin Fatang rearticulated the Chinese offer to talk with the Dalai Lama, however, framed his appeal with a direct criticism of the Dalai Lama: “his greatest mistake is treason. He is not only carrying out traitorous activities but also spreading erroneous remarks in foreign countries. He has done a disservice to the motherland and the people. This is very bad and he has discredited himself.”8 This was the first instance of harsh rhetoric against the Dalai Lama in the post-Mao reform era.

In October 1984, the CCP agreed to meet with a delegation from Dharamsala in Beijing. The Tibetan exile delegation again sought to deflect the Chinese attempt to limit the scope of negotiations to just the personal status of the Dalai Lama, and proposed the de-militarization of Tibet and the creation of a “zone of peace.” The Chinese once again rejected it, sending a warning to the Dalai Lama not to “beat around the bush or look for a bargain.”9
The continued success of the CCP’s reform efforts bolstered its stance towards negotiations with the Dalai Lama. Popular opinion in Tibet towards the CCP was at an all-time high in 1985. And that same year, Hu Yaobang replaced TAR Party Secretary Yin Fatang with Wu Jinghua, a Yi minority and liberal proponent of Hu’s reform initiatives who was particularly popular with Tibetans.

Under Wu, the TAR enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy in comparison to the years after 1959. Five of the six Deputy Secretaries that Wu appointed were ethnic Tibetans. In August 1985, Beijing announced that the local TAR government could “disregard” the central government’s regulations that did not conform to the specific conditions in the region. And in July 1986, the TAR government initiated a trial basis for Tibetan to be adopted as the main language of administration. According to Tsering, at this time, more and more Tibetans inside China became “willing to accept the limits imposed by the Chinese,” seeking to address practical “questions of policy and the needs of the Tibetans,” and not necessarily the fundamental issue of independence. Thus, one sees that the period of economic reform and increased prosperity in the early to mid-1980s coincided with a loosening of Han control over Tibet.

The CCP began loosening restrictions on religious practices and institutions. Tibetans began to publicly display photos of the Dalai Lama, and to defy Chinese laws restricting the rebuilding of monasteries and the entrance of minors into the monastic tradition. While relaxed regulations on religion bolstered public opinion of the CCP in Tibet, they ironically revealed the centrality of the Dalai Lama in Tibetan culture, bringing to the fore the question of his return to China.

In 1987, Gyalo Thondup met privately with Chinese officials in Beijing. Thondup pushed for a resumption of talks, however the CCP insisted that it would not accept a delegation
composed of officials from the exile government. Political scientist Allen Carlson notes, “Frustration with the Dalai Lama’s failure to offer a substantive reply to Hu’s 1981 proposal had begun to mount in Beijing and strengthened the hand of those who were already critical of the cooperative policy line of the early 1980s.”

The progressive elements within the CCP leadership, such as Hu, had hypothesized that a more liberal Tibet policy would curb the Dalai Lama’s hand at the negotiating table with the Chinese as well as his influence internationally. They based their reformed Tibet policy on the principle that the CCP’s sovereignty over Tibet rested with the Tibetan people, and as a result, pinned the successful resolution of the Tibet issue to the return of the Dalai Lama. Hu’s failure to secure the Dalai Lama’s return undermined his influence in the Party. When a series of student protests broke out in China in 1987, Hu’s political opponents successfully blamed his liberal policies for the instability, and forced him to resign as Party Secretary.

Dharamsala noted these changes in Beijing with growing alarm. Throughout the 1980s, the Dalai Lama had focused his efforts on negotiations with the CCP. Over the course of the talks however, both Dharamsala and Beijing had become increasingly stubborn and cynical with regard to the dialogue process. The CCP remained open to the principle of dialogue, and kept Hu’s five-point proposal on the table for discussions. However, the Party’s refusal to meet with Tibetan exile officials and the fall of Hu Yaobang convinced Dharamsala that Beijing would be less accommodating in future rounds of dialogue with the Dalai Lama. Thus, in an effort to exert external pressure on Beijing to negotiate its Tibet policy with the Dalai Lama and the exile government, Dharamsala launched a campaign to bolster the Dalai Lama’s international influence.

On September 21, 1987, in a groundbreaking address to the American Congress, the Dalai Lama delivered his five-point peace plan, which included:

1. Unifying ethnographic Tibet under a “zone of peace”;
2. Ending Beijing’s policy of “opening up Tibet,” as codified in the 1984 Second Tibet Work Forum;
3. Recognizing the fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms of the Tibetan people;
4. Restoring and protecting Tibet’s natural environment; and,
5. Engaging in earnest negotiations on the future status of Tibet.¹

The proposal was a public declaration of what the Dalai Lama had attempted to privately negotiate with the CCP on. It also played to Americans’ increasing fascination with Tibet as well as its fears of a rising China. In 1985, members of Congress signed a letter addressed to Chinese President Li Xiannian calling for direct negotiations with the Dalai Lama. And in June 1987, Congress passed a bill declaring Tibet to be an occupied country.² 1987 also saw Congress enact non-binding measures declaring that the US should make Tibet a higher policy priority and should urge China to establish a constructive dialogue with the Dalai Lama.³

However, the unprecedented speech to Congress in 1987 did not indicate a shift in US foreign policy. The State Department disavowed any support for the proposal, and stressed that neither the US nor any member of the UN recognized Tibetan independence.⁴

The Chinese immediately rejected the proposal, just as they had done during private negotiations. Nonetheless, the publicity and international attention that the Dalai Lama’s speech afforded Dharamsala worried Beijing tremendously. Xinhua’s response to the September 1987 speech chastised the US for interfering “in China’s internal affairs” and allowing “the Dalai Lama to conduct political activities aimed at advocating independence for Tibet and sabotaging the unity of China.”⁵
On September 27, 1987, six days after the Dalai Lama’s speech, 21 monks from Drepung Monastery staged the first pro-independence demonstration since Dharamsala’s fact-finding delegations visited Tibet in 1979 and 1980. The Chinese police immediately suppressed the protest and arrested many of the monks. On October 1, Tibetan monks and lay people staged a second demonstration, which again led to suppression and arrests. Tibetans then gathered outside the police station holding the detainees and demanded their release. This soon escalated to violence when the police fired into the crowd, killing eight to ten people.6

For Beijing, these protests were particularly worrisome because they served to confirm the Dalai Lama’s representations of human rights violations at the hands of repressive policies. Until then, the CCP had been perceived as relatively liberal and popular among local Tibetans. The international campaign, as a result of the CCP’s inability to negotiate the Dalai Lama’s return, and the protests that followed were seen in Beijing as signs that its moderate and conciliatory Tibet policy was failing.

The CCP leadership directly linked this internal unrest to the external activities of the Dalai Lama and his international supporters. A Beijing Review editorial classified the Tibetan “riots” as having been “designed in faraway quarters as an echo to the Dalai Lama’s separationist activities during his visits to the United States and Europe.”7 For the CCP, the timing between the speech and the first protest confirmed that there was a meticulously coordinated effort to bring internal and external pressure on China to negotiate with the Dalai Lama.

This suspicion was furthered by the protestors’ use of symbols of nationalism that had been invented by the exile community, such as the Tibetan flag emblazoned with two snow lions holding three gems. Moreover, Dharamsala claimed a degree of responsibility for the protests in
order to further its international standing by suggesting that it could influence the situation inside Tibet.

In November 1987, the new head of the Party Zhao Ziyang convened a Politburo meeting in Beijing to discuss the situation in Tibet. Zhao sought to find a moderate pathway between the general liberalization that his predecessor Hu Yaobang had been pursuing and the more hardline policies that would come to the fore under Li Peng in 1989.

The November 1987 Politburo meeting concluded that Beijing’s Tibet policy had been too liberal, marking the beginning of the CCP’s retreat from its prior approach to resolving the Tibet question. In addition to outside agitation, the CCP blamed the unintended consequences of its policy for the protests, specifically the increasing number of monks and nuns as well as the reopening of many temples and monasteries. In fact, Chinese law prohibited the rebuilding of these monasteries, but local government officials had turned a blind eye to this during the relaxation of religious policy during the 1980s. The Tibetan religious community led nearly all the demonstrations that took place from September 1987 to 1990, and as such, affirmed to the CCP that its more liberal policy towards religion was a failure. As Tibetologist Tom Grunfeld summarizes:

The international clamor and continued unrest inside Tibet had revitalized a policy debate in Beijing between moderates, who argued for compromise, more freedom for Tibetan cultural practices, and the return of the Dalai Lama, and hard-liners, who were just as happy breaking off ties to the Dalai Lama, waiting for him to die, and imposing further restrictions on the traditional Tibetan way of life, with greater efforts toward assimilation.\(^8\)

Shortly after the November Politburo decision, the Lhasa daily newspaper published a front-page article that criticized local cadres’ excessive and incorrect implementation of “ultraleftist ideology,” harking back to the Party’s criticism of the Gang of Four in order to establish its legitimacy in the wake of local dissent and unrest.\(^9\)
TAR Party Secretary Wu Jinghua sought to deflect the blame and pressure imposed on him from Beijing, stating that the fundamental reason for the protests was that “we had implemented a leftist policy for a long time in the past, and that we divorced ourselves from the masses and harmed them.” This did little to sway hardline policymakers in Beijing who countered that the reforms had encouraged the unrestricted growth of local Tibetan nationalism.

As this internal debate developed, China’s liberal Tibetan religious policy continued into early 1988 with the Great Prayer Festival. And with the international community paying closer and closer attention to the situation in Tibet, Beijing increasingly felt the need to prove that its policy initiatives were working. Thus, the Chinese leadership made a number of gestures in the lead-up to the festival in order to ensure its success and calm the restive monk population.

The Panchen Lama visited Lhasa in January 1988 and announced in front of a crowd of assembled monks that the government would give reparations to three major Lhasa monasteries. And one day prior to this announcement, the local government released 59 detained monks as a gesture of goodwill. However, these attempts to defuse the situation were unsuccessful: on the last day of the Great Prayer Festival, a spontaneous demonstration for Tibetan independence erupted, which was followed by more arrests, further antagonizing the Tibetan population.

To generalize the Tibetan population inside the TAR as restive monks and nuns totally opposed to the Party’s rule is incorrect. Historian Tsering Shakya notes, “Many Tibetan intellectuals and those who worked in the government felt that the outright demand for independence was futile and that it would only succeed in pushing the Chinese into adopting more repressive measures…. they saw the demonstrations as subverting the course of the reforms.”
Tibetans were fully aware that Beijing was pursuing a moderate and conciliatory reform policy that had loosened restrictions on religious and cultural practices. However, the loss of their leader and the suffering they had endured since 1959 under direct Chinese rule permeated the Tibetan collective consciousness. Increasing Han migration since the 1984 “opening” reinforced these ill feelings, and ethnic tensions pervaded society. Beijing’s push for economic development created the demand for skilled labor that only Han migrants could satisfy, which further marginalized ethnic Tibetans and propagated among them the notion of “Han chauvinism.”

Furthermore, the Dalai Lama’s international campaign, and its perceived success in Lhasa, served to bolster the demonstrations that began in 1987. In the period directly after Hu’s ousting, Beijing continued to center its Tibet policy on securing the return of the Dalai Lama, for the ultimate goal of consolidating Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. As such, in April 1988, the Chinese government announced that if the Dalai Lama publicly gave up the goal of independence, he could live in Tibet rather than Beijing. This was a significant concession that addressed the Dalai Lama’s initial rejection of the CCP’s five-point proposal for his return.

In June, the Dalai Lama addressed the European Parliament in Strasbourg. There, he made the first public statement outlining the conditions for his return, which included the unification of ethnographic Tibet under a “self-governing democratic political entity,” and the greater protection of religious and human rights for Tibetans. The Strasbourg proposal explicitly did not seek complete independence, and foreign officials and media hailed it as a major concession for the purpose of engaging the Chinese government in sincere negotiations.

The specific line disavowing independence called for a Tibet “in association with the People’s Republic of China.” Shakya comments, “This was taken to mean that Tibet would
have a similar relationship with China as that between Bhutan and India, or, in former times, between Mongolia and the Soviet Union.”\(^{16}\) The phrase “in association with” meant an acceptance of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, in other words, a return to the degree of autonomy that Tibet experienced before 1951. Tibetologist Robert Barnett stated that acceptance of the Strasbourg proposal would have made China a protectorate over Tibet, thus providing Tibet with an opening to become an independent country.\(^{17}\)

The Chinese interpreted the Strasbourg proposal as an attempt to further internationalize the Tibet question so as to gain more autonomy and agitate for complete independence. Beijing opposed the proposal’s rejection of China’s model for regional national autonomy as well as the announcement that the Dalai Lama’s negotiating team would include the Dutch lawyer Michael van Walt van Praag.

In September, the Chinese delivered their formal response to the Strasbourg proposal. The CCP announced that they were still open to dialogue with the Dalai Lama, and that the talks could be held in “Beijing, Hong Kong or any of [the PRC’s] embassies or consulates abroad.” However, the announcement explicitly indicated that no foreigners should be involved, and also specified two prerequisites for resumption of talks: 1) the exiled Kashag government in Dharamsala should not be involved, and; 2) the Strasbourg proposal cannot be the basis of negotiations because it has “not at all relinquished the concept of the ‘independence of Tibet.’”\(^{18}\)

Dharamsala responded by publicly announcing that the talks would be held in Geneva in January 1989. The announcement also named the Dalai Lama’s team of negotiators, which would be headed by a minister of the Kashag government, Tashi Wangdi, and would include Michael van Walt van Praag as a legal advisor. This direct contradiction of the Chinese prerequisites for holding the dialogue was a calculated public relations strategy on the part of
Dharamsala: the announcement gave the impression that the Dalai Lama was willing to attend the talks, and also put the onus on the CCP to honor its earlier offer to hold talks. As a result, Beijing faced increased external pressure as the international media linked its rejection of Dharamsala’s proposal to an insincere and ineffectual Tibet policy.

In December 1988, Lhasa saw its third bloody riot since September 1987. Soon after, the CCP dismissed Wu Jinghua as TAR Party Secretary. Even during the periods of unrest, Wu adhered to the liberal policies initiated by Hu Yaobang, and consistently held that the demonstrations were not incited by outside agitators. Thus, the failure of Wu and the liberal policies he promoted in regard to dealing with Tibetan protests and dissent, coupled with the growing prominence of Tibet as an international issue, further strengthened the hardline officials in the CCP leadership.

Amid this deteriorating situation, the Panchen Lama died unexpectedly in January 1989, providing the moderate elements in the CCP leadership with one final opportunity to satisfy the lynchpin component of their reform policies: to secure the return of the Dalai Lama to the motherland. China’s Buddhist Association invited the Dalai Lama to Beijing to participate in funeral services for the Panchen Lama, letting him know that this would be an opportune time to discuss the political situation in Tibet informally with top government officials. Beijing was more trusting of the Dalai Lama than his advisors, and its offer to negotiate with him directly sought to break the dialogic deadlock.

Despite assurances that there be an opportunity for direct high-level talks, the Dalai Lama declined the invitation. The apparent success of the Dalai Lama’s international initiative spurred Dharamsala’s reluctance to negotiate with the Chinese in 1988 and 1989. Throughout the 1980s, the Dalai Lama’s very absence from China enabled him to mobilize international pressure on
China to not only resume dialogue, but also to gain concessions from Beijing, such as the modification of the five-point proposal to allow the Dalai Lama to live in Lhasa.

More importantly, Dharamsala was wary of the actual negotiation process. As Shakya states: “The Dalai Lama realized that whatever agreement he reached with the Chinese would be final and would seal the question of Tibet permanently.”\textsuperscript{19} Therefore, he had to obtain from the CCP concessions that would not only grant Tibet greater autonomy but would also allow more space to actually exercise that autonomy. Tibetologist Melvyn Goldstein speculates that the Dalai Lama’s refusal to attend the Panchen Lama’s memorial service in 1989 was motivated by exile leaders’ fears that in direct negotiations, the Dalai Lama might accept a less favorable compromise than hoped for.\textsuperscript{20}

The ultimate failure of the reform era dialogue was due to mistrust on both sides, specifically their perception of the other side’s unwillingness to reciprocate concessions. For the CCP, its modification of its five-point proposal to allow for the Dalai Lama to live in Lhasa was met with Dharamsala’s refusal to narrow the scope of negotiations to the Dalai Lama’s personal status. On the other hand, the Dalai Lama’s disavowal of Tibetan independence in the Strasbourg proposal was not taken in good faith by the CCP.

Deadlocked negotiations on the Dalai Lama’s return, the continuing demonstrations in Tibet, and escalating international pressure pushed Beijing to abandon its moderate Tibet policy in favor of one that sought to consolidate the Party’s power and stabilize the restive region. The appointment of Hu Jintao as TAR Party Secretary and his subsequent declaration of martial law in Tibet in March 1989 were the clearest indications that Beijing had shifted to a hardline Tibet policy.

The highest echelons of the Party leadership have always had the greatest sway in defining China’s Tibet policy. The movement towards a hardline Tibet policy outlined in the previous section reflected a gradual shift in the internal politics of the CCP away from a conciliatory, moderate stance put forward by Hu Yaobang to a rejectionist, hardline approach embodied by Hu Jintao.

On April 15, 1989, the disgraced Hu Yaobang died suddenly of a heart attack. That same day, students began gathering in Tiananmen Square to mourn his death and call for a reversal of the verdict against him. The gathering soon swelled to a widespread student and worker protest, which demanded greater economic liberalization and democratic reform, and numbered more than 100,000 in the central square of Beijing. Demonstrations in support of the students and workers broke out all over China.

On May 19, Deng Xiaoping, presiding over a Politburo Standing Committee meeting, declared that martial law was now the only option in Beijing. Furthermore, Deng said he was mistaken in choosing Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang as his successors, resolving to remove the latter. In making its decision to declare martial law, Beijing was clearly influenced by the precedent of TAR Party Secretary Hu Jintao’s declaration in Tibet two months earlier, which had effectively stabilized Chinese control over the region.

The CCP declared martial law on May 20, and on June 1 the PLA moved tanks and soldiers towards Tiananmen Square, authorizing them to fire upon civilians if needed. By June 4, the square had been cleared forcefully. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen protests of 1989, or “June Fourth,” Beijing arrested protestors and their supporters, banned many foreign journalists from the country, and initiated a widespread campaign to purge those within the Party who were...
sympathetic to the students and had tended towards more liberal policies. Several senior officials were removed from their positions, most notably Zhao Ziyang. In this way, June Fourth fostered a more hardline approach in the Party leadership, which had major implications for Beijing’s Tibet policy.

International condemnations of the Tiananmen suppression continued well into the 1990s, with foreign governments imposing a number of economic sanctions and arms embargoes on the PRC (the latter are still in effect). The UN Human Rights Council issued a resolution declaring its concern about the implications that the crackdown would have on the future of Chinese citizens’ human rights. And the US debated whether or not to renew China’s Most Favored Nation (MFN) status, which would result in the imposition of substantially higher customs duties on more than 95% of US imports from China, effectively closing the American market to Chinese goods. While Congress voted to renew China’s MFN status in 1990 and 1991, the debates deeply troubled Beijing, especially Deng Xiaoping and his policy initiatives to develop China’s export market beginning in 1992.

In October 1989, the Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize. The Norway Nobel Committee’s decision to award the Dalai Lama reflected the international community’s negative perception of the Chinese government following June Fourth. More importantly, the award elevated the Dalai Lama’s stature in the world, and signified the international community’s definitive categorization of Tibet as a human rights issue. In the above-mentioned ways, the international community sought to put pressure on the CCP to redress human rights grievances, which emboldened hardline policymakers and their immediate responses to the instability China faced.
In an October 1989 Politburo meeting, the CCP concluded that its Tibet policy’s moderate approach of liberalization and engagement with the Dalai Lama had been ill conceived. For the CCP leadership, its policy initiatives in the post-Mao reform era had neither produced Tibetans’ acceptance of Chinese rule nor the return of the Dalai Lama. The reforms aimed at loosening religious restrictions and granting greater autonomy had actually increased Tibetan nationalism, which manifested in demonstrations that weakened the Party’s legitimacy in Tibet. Dharamsala’s international campaign had bolstered these nationalistic aspirations, and as many in the Party believed, led directly to the instability from 1987 to 1989.

The continuation of the Dalai Lama’s international campaign, coupled with his refusal to negotiate in 1988 and 1989, indicated to Beijing that it could no longer expect the Dalai Lama to play a constructive role in resolving the Tibet question. For the CCP, resolution has always meant securing unchallenged sovereignty over Tibet. Tibet policy in the 1980s had reflected the predominant philosophy in the Party that sovereignty was based at least partially on Tibetans’ acceptance of Chinese rule. As such, the return of their spiritual leader was a significant factor guiding the CCP’s approach to securing legitimacy in Tibet.

However, the October 1989 meeting now identified the Dalai Lama as a political challenge to the Party in Tibet. Because the Dalai Lama had consistently stipulated his return to be contingent upon the conditions in Tibet, the disavowal of securing his return signaled that its Tibet policy initiatives no longer necessitated the approval of the Tibetan people. The CCP now placed rapid economic development and social stability at the center of its Tibet policy, and began to focus on a strategy of modernization that would enhance its legitimacy and secure the region’s stability.
To this end, the PRC State Council Information Office published the first “White Paper” on Tibet in 1992. The document made a historical argument asserting ownership over Tibet, framed the Dalai Lama’s activities as directed towards splitting the motherland, and pegged economic and social progress in Tibet to the CCP’s policy initiatives. It acknowledged Tibet’s unique culture, and affirmed the realization of Tibetans’ rights to national regional autonomy and freedom of religion through the PRC Constitution.3

In practice, however, the CCP consolidated the central government’s control over the local government by purging cadres who defied the new Tibet policy imposed by Beijing. Moreover, in the period after 1989, the CCP tightened control on religious institutions, which were seen as hotbeds of Tibetan nationalism.

In July 1994, the Third Tibet Work Forum codified these policy initiatives, setting out an economic development program that would provide large subsidies for development projects aimed at enhancing infrastructure and production. Moreover, the Forum formally instituted campaigns to monitor religious institutions and Tibetan cadres for signs of political deviance. The Forum established stability in the TAR as a prerequisite for development, and also determined the Dalai Lama’s international activities as a factor for instability.4

The Party’s mistrust of the Dalai Lama was reaffirmed in May 1995 when the Dalai Lama unexpectedly and preemptively announced that he recognized Gendun Choekyi Nyima as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama. This public statement came just as Beijing was preparing to draw names from the golden urn, which would have almost certainly recognized the same boy—the Tashilhunpo Monastery conducted the search and provided the information to both the central government and the Dalai Lama in a mutual effort to prevent the selection process from turning into a political circus.
However, the Dalai Lama’s announcement did just that, asserting that the CCP had no authority over the selection process at all. Moreover, it proved to the international community that the exiled Dalai Lama exerted enough influence in Tibet to decide the results of a search conducted by the CCP.

The statement infuriated Beijing, who used the golden urn lottery to select a different boy in November 1995. The CCP effectively placed Gendun Choekyi Nyima under house arrest to prevent a flight into exile. His whereabouts remain unknown to this day, despite continued inquiries by the international community.

For Dharamsala, this has created another powerful human rights issue – expressed by references to “the world’s youngest political prisoner” – to fuel its international campaign. More importantly however, the Dalai Lama’s preemptive recognition served to further entrench the distrust and animosity many Chinese officials already felt toward him. The political debacle drastically undermined the credibility of the remaining moderate cadres who had pushed for cooperation with the Dalai Lama in the selection process. It therefore reinforced the hardline officials’ belief that the Dalai Lama could not be trusted or worked with.⁵

By the mid-1990s, the CCP’s trust of the Dalai Lama was at an all-time low and the integrationist policy it codified at the 1994 Tibet Work Forum appeared to be working towards stabilizing the restive religious population of Tibetan society. These trends seemed to suggest an increasingly intractable Tibet policy, which was further confirmed by the rise of hardline policymakers in the CCP leadership in the wake of the 1989 unrest.

At the same time however, the government’s suppression of dissent in 1989 set in motion a series of interrelated circumstances – internally and externally – that would provide the impetus for the CCP leadership to redress its Tibet policy, specifically regarding engagement with the Dalai Lama. Internally, Deng Xiaoping’s new economic development initiatives and the ascension of Jiang Zemin to Party Secretary moved improved Sino-American relations to the center of Beijing’s foreign policy. And externally, foreign governments’ engagement with the Chinese government on its human rights record produced concessions from Beijing in exchange for stronger economic ties and improved international standing.

In the immediate post-1989 period, pressure from foreign governments took the forms of economic sanctions and public condemnations. Every year from 1989 to 1998, the UN Human Rights Commission considered a resolution, sponsored by the United States and other western countries, urging the Chinese government to take action to improve its human rights. China was able to prevent the Commission from discussing its human rights record by having its allies on the Commission put up a “no action resolution,” all of which passed, (save one where there was a tie vote). As part of its strategy to defeat these country resolutions China initiated a policy of human rights dialogues in 1991, which proved very successful. It had the added advantage of helping the general effort to preserve MFN status in the US.

In the immediate post-1989 period, the US was a sponsor and strong supporter of the UN resolutions condemning China. Yet the Bush administration made a decision not to impose economic sanctions on China, issuing directives to renew its MFN status in 1990 and again in 1991. Despite efforts in Congress to overturn these decisions, Bush’s veto was sustained by narrow margins in the Senate. Nonetheless, these Congressional debates forced Beijing to
recognize that American popular opinion with regard to China’s human rights record could influence Congress to revoke its trade privileges. This was particularly worrisome to Deng Xiaoping, who sought to increase the pace of China’s economic development through the growth of its export market.

In 1993, President Clinton arrived in Washington with a tougher China policy on his agenda. In addition to the “free emigration” condition set forth in the Trade Act of 1974, Clinton issued an executive order that set forth additional conditions for the 1994 renewal of China’s MFN status. These conditions mandated compliance with the 1992 US-China prison labor agreement and also required “significant progress” on other matters including taking steps to adhere to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, releasing and accounting for citizens imprisoned during the Democracy Wall and Tiananmen Square movements, permitting international human rights organizations to access its prisons, permitting international and radio and television broadcasts into China and protecting Tibet’s distinctive religious and cultural heritage.\(^2\)

However, these conditions proved impossible to achieve. And for the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, they were a watered down disappointment that neither mentioned Tibetan prisoners of conscience nor resumption of contacts with the Dalai Lama. In 1994, the Clinton administration abandoned the strategy of insisting on human rights as a condition of trade benefits, instead renewing China’s MFN status only on the basis of its compliance to the statutory condition of freedom of emigration.\(^3\)

The Clinton administration’s failure to link economic sanctions to China’s overall human rights record diluted the law in place that makes clear that the freedom of emigration is inseparable from all human rights freedoms. And it represented America’s increasing
unwillingness to jeopardize trade relations just as new markets were opening up and China’s growing economic importance was being recognized, as were the success of its international policies. These factors, coupled with the Party’s visceral resistance to external pressure, forced the US to consider alternative means of pressuring the Chinese government to redress human rights grievances, including in Tibet.

These means included the creation of a Congressional Executive Commission on China (CECC) that would monitor and advise Congress and the Executive Branch on ways and means to address those grievances. Another approach was to increase multilateral efforts, through allies and the United Nations, and through “name and shame” tactics like the sponsoring of China country resolutions.

That said, the threat represented by the possible revocation of MFN by the Congress – the only time that China been threatened with significant economic sanctions over its human rights behavior – was taken off the table in 1994. Beijing was therefore less inclined to pay attention to the costs of a bad international image. However, it couldn’t ignore international public opinion entirely.

With the Dalai Lama’s acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the US government’s rhetorical condemnations of the Chinese government increasingly focused on Tibet as a human rights issue. From his first meeting with Jiang Zemin in November 1993, President Clinton pushed for resumption in talks between the Chinese and the Dalai Lama, demonstrating in stark terms the bottom line approach of the American administration – dialogue über alles – and Beijing’s de minimus response to the questions of human rights and Tibet.

As Congress grappled with ways to retool American human rights policies in the wake of the decision to renew MFN, ideas were floated for the creation of a consulate in Lhasa and the
position of a special envoy for Tibet. However, the provisions it introduced called for the envoy to have an ambassadorial rank, which the Clinton administration opposed, fearful of the political ramifications.4

In July 1997, in an effort to compromise with Congress, President Clinton announced the establishment of a special coordinator for Tibet policy – without ambassadorial rank – in the State Department. The role of the special coordinator centered on promoting a substantive dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama. Thus, the creation of a special coordinator for Tibet represented a further entrenchment of the Tibet issue within America’s China policy.

In the final years of his leadership, Deng Xiaoping sought to strengthen Sino-American relations in order to improve China’s international image and standing, but more importantly to ensure the success of his initiative for accelerated growth through the development of an export-based economy. Jiang Zemin, who had replaced Zhao Ziyang as Party Secretary after June Fourth, was a major proponent of Deng’s initiatives, which strengthened his political capital and led to his election as PRC President. In the wake of Deng’s death in February 1997, Jiang Zemin delivered a tearful eulogy that cemented his rise to the apex of the CCP leadership. The CCP under Jiang’s leadership continued to pursue Deng’s goals of rapid economic growth and improved international relations, which served to strengthen Jiang’s legitimacy as Deng’s successor.

Jiang Zemin’s groundbreaking state visit to the US in October 1997 signaled the beginning of a new and concerted effort to move improved Sino-American relations to the core of Beijing’s foreign policy. President Clinton reciprocated with a trip to Beijing in June 1998. During the summit, Clinton and Jiang jostled on live television on issues of human rights and
Tibet. Jiang defended the crackdowns in 1989 as well as Beijing’s Tibet policy, which he said had helped eliminate feudalism. In an attempt to deflect and preclude further criticism, Jiang announced that direct channels of communication with the Dalai Lama had already been reestablished.

The announcement was the first public acknowledgement of an informal series of face-to-face talks between the Dalai Lama’s representatives and officials close to Jiang. In early 1997, after consolidating his authority in post-Deng China, Jiang initiated the informal dialogue with the Dalai Lama’s representatives for the principal purpose of strengthening ties with the US, and for the secondary purpose of isolating Taiwan, which the Dalai Lama visited for the first time in March 1997. The CCP was alarmed by this visit, and sought to drive a wedge between Dharamsala and Taipei.

Jiang’s public acknowledgement of the secretive talks stunned many in the Chinese domestic audience, angered hardline cadres, and raised expectations in the international community that the informal talks would lay the groundwork for rapprochement with the Dalai Lama. However, by early December 1998, the Dalai Lama publicly acknowledged that the talks had broken down.

The collapse of Jiang’s 1997 and 1998 initiatives to engage the Dalai Lama indicated a lack of consensus within the CCP leadership about how to respond to international pressure on Tibet. The clearest indication of this was that the dialogue was held without the involvement of the UFWD, the institution formally placed in charge of discussions with the Dalai Lama. Moreover, Jiang’s decision to engage with the Dalai Lama directly contradicted Beijing’s Tibet policy, as codified in the 1994 Third Tibet Work Forum, to isolate the exiled Tibetan leader.
In this way, Jiang’s June 1998 announcement was a public acknowledgement of a weak and inconsistent Tibet policy, which served to undermine Jiang’s authority in the Party. Jiang therefore withdrew his support for the dialogue in order to regain stature within the CCP. In late 1998, he formally reversed his position at a CCP meeting, signaling that the dialogue could not continue and stating that the Dalai was not trustworthy.\(^5\) Despite the ultimate collapse of these exploratory talks, the episode signified that there existed elements in the senior CCP leadership, particularly Jiang, who were willing to reconsider the prevailing Chinese policy opposing engagement with the Dalai Lama.

The abortive talks, coupled with two public relations disasters in 1998 and 2000, emboldened external pressure on Beijing to redress its Tibet policy. In 1998, one of China’s highest-ranking Tibetan Buddhist leaders and a key member of the state-sanctioned religious establishment, Arjia Rinpoche, quietly defected to the US. This was followed by the dramatic flight of the young Karmapa to India in 2000. To the CCP, the departures of these two significant Tibetan religious figures were clear indications that its Tibet policy had failed to win the favor of the religious elite in Tibet. Furthermore, the two highly visible events prompted further international condemnation of human rights violations in Tibet.

In May 2001, the Tibet Policy Act was introduced into both houses of the US Congress, with the stated purpose of supporting “the aspirations of the Tibetan people to safeguard their distinct identity.”\(^6\) The bill codified the position of the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues at the State Department, whose stated goal was to promote resumption of dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama.

In the wake of this negative publicity, in June 2001, Beijing convened the Fourth Tibet Work Forum, which Jiang Zemin presided over. The Forum strengthened Beijing’s commitment
to the existing policy of rapid economic development, and even expanded the implications of the policy through the “Great Western Development Strategy,” which would bolster China’s underdeveloped western regions through large infrastructure projects such as pipelines and railways. Social stability remained a top priority for Beijing’s Tibet policy. As such, the Forum reaffirmed the need to keep a critical eye on Tibetan cadres, highlighting the fact that the CCP remained cognizant and wary of the Dalai Lama’s spiritual and political influence in Tibet.

Most significantly however, the Forum reversed the CCP’s 1989 decision, codified in 1994, to isolate and delegitimize the Dalai Lama. This provided the institutional backing for reopening negotiations with the Dalai Lama, which would serve to deflect external pressure by addressing the international community’s most concrete grievance regarding the Tibet issue: Beijing’s treatment of the Dalai Lama.

For the CCP leadership under Jiang Zemin, a softer approach toward the Dalai Lama served to curry favor with the US, which would in turn bolster their strategic and economic relationship. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the CCP perceived another opportunity to fundamentally strengthen its ties to the US government, which was now seeking allies as it formulated and pursued a new foreign policy based upon the War on Terror.

One such mean of achieving a strengthening of relations with the US was to grant early releases to high-profile Tibetan prisoners. In 2001, Senator Jim Jeffords of Vermont had voted against renewing China’s trade privileges to protest the imprisonment of the Tibetan filmmaker Ngawang Choephel, who had studied for some time at Middlebury College as a Fulbright Scholar. Choephel was released one month prior to President George W. Bush’s first visit to China, and China went on to get permanent MFN.
Around the same time, Congressman Tom Lantos, Chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee, petitioned the Chinese government to release Takna Jigme Sangpo, the longest-serving Tibetan prisoner of conscience whose repeated protests while in prison had extended his sentence considerably. Sangpo was released on medical parole in March 2002, and in July, he boarded a flight to the US to seek treatment.

In January 2002, the Chinese government reestablished direct contact with the Dalai Lama’s representatives. And in July 2002, Beijing invited the Dalai Lama’s brother, Gyalo Thondup, back to China, which indicated to the US that resumption of dialogue was both possible and imminent. The US continued to promote the resumption, and in August 2002, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee led a delegation to Tibet with that stated purpose.

Under Jiang’s leadership, China’s international prominence grew significantly, and it recovered from its status as a pariah following the events of 1989. This was largely due to Jiang’s willingness to make human rights concessions, such as releasing prisoners of conscience and resuming dialogue with the Dalai Lama. Yet never was there a hint of changing the fundamentals of China’s Tibet policy.


On September 9, 2002, the Dalai Lama announced from Dharamsala that special envoy Lodi Gyari and envoy Kelsang Gyaltsen would visit China. It was the first visit of its kind since 1984 and included meetings with UFWD head Wang Zhaoguo in Beijing, and with top-ranking ethnic Tibetan officials in Lhasa.
The CCP’s once-in-a-decade leadership transition was slated for the 16th Party Congress in November 2002, which would begin the transfer of power from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao. Despite stepping down from the Politburo Standing Committee, Jiang still held considerable power there, with six of the nine standing members linked to his “Shanghai clique.” Jiang also retained the position of PRC President until March 2003, and chairman of the Central Military Commission until September 2004. He sought to rule behind-the-scenes just as Deng had until his death in 1997.

In his remaining years at the top of the Party, Jiang sought to bolster his legacy of economic growth and improved relations with the US. He was a proponent of exchanging human rights concessions – such as prisoner releases or resuming dialogue with the Dalai Lama – for stronger international standing – such as Beijing being awarded the 2008 Olympics and its entrance into the World Trade Organization, both of which took place in 2001.

Even with Jiang’s presence within the leadership, the CCP remained cautious in its depiction of the Sino-Tibetan dialogue. In media and press statements, Beijing distanced itself from the dialogue process. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Kong Quan stated that the September 2002 round was a private visit. And TAR chairperson Legchog insisted that his meeting with Lodi Gyari was private, and that he was unaware of Gyari’s role as the Dalai Lama’s representative.² The CCP thus sought to minimize the role of the Dalai Lama in the delegation’s visit in an effort to preclude Tibetan demonstrations, such as those that were provoked by the fact-finding delegations in the early 1980s.

Lodi Gyari and Kelsang Gyaltse returned from China with an optimistic assessment of the visit. On September 29, Gyari stated, “We have made every effort to create the basis for opening a new chapter in our relationship. We are fully aware that this task cannot be completed
The statement emphasized that the intent of the first visit was to create an atmosphere conducive to continuing the dialogue. To this end, he made a number of gestures signaling the Tibetan side’s good faith in the dialogue, such as praising the officials he met with. Moreover, Dharamsala issued a circular on September 30 calling on all Tibetans and Tibet supporters to refrain from public protest during Jiang Zemin’s upcoming visit to the US in October.

This moratorium on protests incited resentment within the exile community while simultaneously raising their expectations for the prospects of the dialogue. At a Kalachakra teaching one day before Jiang’s arrival in the US, the Dalai Lama called on Tibetans to heed Dharamsala’s message and to take a restrained approach towards Chinese authorities in response to their willingness to reengage in dialogue.  

The timing of the dialogue’s first round coincided with the publication of the first annual report of the newly established US Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), which was tasked with monitoring the conditions of human rights and rule of law in the PRC. With regard to Tibet, the first annual report highlighted the sovereignty debate and attacks on human rights, culture and religion; and one of its three primary recommendations was for the US to continue promoting the resumption of dialogue.

The CCP’s decision to resume the dialogue one month prior to Jiang’s final American tour was therefore a direct signal to the US that the leadership was sincerely addressing the Tibet issue. The Chinese also released Tibetan nun Ngawang Sangdrol – leader of the so-called Singing Nuns of Drapchi Prison – one week prior to Jiang’s scheduled arrival in the US. Jiang’s visit went smoothly, and both in meetings with American officials and media, Tibet took a
backseat to the issues of North Korea’s nuclear proliferation and the situation in the Taiwan Straits.

The second round of the Sino-Tibetan dialogue occurred in May 2003. Gyari and Gyaltser met with the UFWD’s new head Liu Yandong and new deputy head Zhu Weiqun, as well as high-ranking Chinese Buddhist leaders. Since this was the Tibetan delegation’s first meeting with the UFWD’s new senior officials since the accession of the PRC’s fourth generation leadership, its purpose was therefore to continue the cultivation of an atmosphere conducive to negotiations. Upon his return from the trip, Gyari issued a guardedly optimistic evaluation of the round: “Both sides agreed that our past relationship had many twists and turns and that many areas of disagreement still exist. The need was felt for more efforts to overcome the existing problems and bring about mutual understanding and trust.”

During the May 2003 round, the envoys’ request to visit a southeastern Tibetan town in Yunnan’s Dechen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) was readily accommodated. The Tibetan delegation took this as a sign that Tibetan areas outside of the TAR might be up for discussion, which was encouraging to the Dalai Lama’s desire to negotiate “under the framework of the Middle Way Approach.”

The Dalai Lama’s Middle Way Approach has formed the basis of negotiations for the Tibetan leadership since the 1980s. It principally aims to resolve the Tibet issue through a negotiated settlement with the Chinese, an aim that garnered majority support from the Tibetan Diaspora polled in referendums in 1995, 1996 and 1997. It has been elaborated in many different forms, such as the five-point peace plan of 1987 and the Strasbourg proposal of 1988, but it has consistently called for the unification of all Tibetan areas in China. The US State Department pledged support for this component of the Middle Way Approach in a report
published in October 2003, which broadened the definition of “Tibet” from solely the TAR to also include TAPs.

The Chinese have consistently denounced the Middle Way Approach as a disguised form of independence. However, with the resumption of dialogue in 2002, Chinese officials and media restrained from harsh polemics even while denouncing the Tibetan proposal. In July 2003, the *People’s Daily* published an article assessing the Dalai Lama’s aims and approach. While the article reiterated the official Party line that the Dalai Lama was disguising independence in his call for genuine autonomy, it nonetheless took an unusually factual approach in detailing and summarizing his proposal, even stating that his Middle Way Approach had become “mature in content.”

The timing of its publication coincided with the second day of UK Prime Minister Tony Blair’s China visit on July 22, 2003, which suggested it was intended for an international audience. Another indication of this intent was its rebuttal of the UK and the US governments’ calls for the CCP to engage in dialogue with the Dalai Lama “without preconditions.” These preconditions, set out both in media briefings and in meetings with the Dalai Lama’s representatives, require that the Dalai Lama acknowledge Taiwan and Tibet as inalienable parts of the PRC, and that he abandon all activities aimed at separating the motherland.

For the CCP, the Dalai Lama’s international campaign – manifested in visits to foreign countries, meetings with foreign government leaders and speeches advocating resolution to the Tibet issue – constitutes the majority of these activities. Beijing therefore did not host the third round of dialogue, expected to take place in October 2003, in order to protest the Dalai Lama’s September 2003 visit to the White House—his first since the dialogue resumed. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Kong Quan condemned the September 2003 meeting between President
Bush and the Dalai Lama and urged the US to not interfere in China’s internal affairs. Kong also reiterated the Party line that the channel for negotiations with the Dalai Lama remained open as long as he stopped his activities aimed at separating the motherland.¹¹

In canceling the third round, Beijing began a policy of retaliating for meetings between the Dalai Lama and foreign leaders. Following German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s meeting with the Dalai Lama in September 2007, the annual round of the Sino-German dialogue on human rights was cancelled. After the Danish prime minister’s meeting with the Dalai Lama in May 2009 Danish firms operating in China encountered difficulties, and overall relations suffered until Denmark issued a statement reaffirming its policy on Tibet and promising to handle the issue more carefully in the future.

In May 2004, the PRC State Council Information Office published a White Paper on Tibet. The document defended the CCP’s system of ethnic autonomy, thereby affirming its determination to realize its own version of autonomy in the TAR. Moreover, it highlighted the Party’s resolve to limit the scope of discussions to the status of the Dalai Lama. The 2004 White Paper concluded with a direct appeal to the Dalai Lama: “It is hoped that the Dalai Lama will look reality in the face, make a correct judgment of the situation, truly relinquish his stand for ‘Tibetan independence,’ and do something beneficial to the progress of China and the region of Tibet in his remaining years.”¹²

The third round of dialogue occurred in September 2004. Gyari and Gyaltsen met again with UFWD head Liu Yandong and deputy head Zhu Weiqun, and visited the Karze TAP in Sichuan Province. The third round failed to produce any substantive results, but nonetheless concluded with agreements to continue the dialogue, to have a round of talks outside of China,
and to allow the inclusion of the Tibetan exile official Ngapa Tsegyam on the Tibetan delegation.\textsuperscript{13}

The formal statement issued by Gyari upon his return gave a more circumspect, yet still positive assessment of the dialogue: “It was apparent from discussions that there are major differences on a number of issues, including some fundamental ones. Both sides acknowledge the need for more substantive discussions in order to narrow down the gaps and reach a common ground.”\textsuperscript{14} Nevertheless, Gyari’s conciliatory tone – specifically, his acknowledgement that the third round was “the most extensive and serious to date,” and his praise of the ethnic Tibetan officials in the Karze TAP – signaled the Dalai Lama’s commitment to continuing the dialogue.

Beginning in 2004, a series of developments in the international arena produced the trend of the CCP taking a harder stance toward external pressure. Jiang Zemin’s retirement from his final CCP post in September 2004 consolidated Hu Jintao’s power and moved improved Sino-American relations away from the center of Beijing’s foreign policy. Furthermore, the rise of China’s economic power, coupled with the decline in global opinion of America under President Bush, strengthened the CCP’s international standing, thus minimizing the impact of foreign governments’ criticisms of its human rights record.

The international community’s need to contain North Korea’s nuclear proliferation resulted in the initiation of a multilateral effort to engage the reclusive country beginning in August 2003. The Six-Party talks included diplomats from the US, Russia, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and China, thus placing the PRC as a key player in resolving a major international problem. The US and North Korea’s hard posture in negotiations produced a deadlock until September 2005, when China helped broker a joint statement of principles between the two
countries. China was therefore seen as playing a positive role in ensuring stability on the Korean peninsula.

Simultaneously, the US’ international image was declining as a result of protracted fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, their growing number of casualties, the debacle of Abu Ghraib, and the indefinite detention without trial of terror suspects at Guantanamo.

In March 2005, the Chinese government released the prominent Uyghur Rebiya Kadeer on medical grounds, one month prior to the final meeting of the UN Human Rights Committee. The Human Rights Council would succeed the Committee in 2006, and as a part of these reforms in the UN, individual countries could no longer put forward so-called “country resolutions.”

Every year since 1989, except 1998, the US had sponsored a country resolution on China’s human rights record. Although China was able to defeat these country resolutions, doing so entailed considerable effort and expense. Moreover, even though each resolution would be ultimately defeated, China’s record was still subject to international scrutiny. Beijing badly wanted to avoid having another bruising fight in Geneva in the last year of the Commission. Negotiations began with Washington over what it would take for the US not to put forward a resolution. Ultimately, the price was the early release of Rebiya Kadeer.

Upon her arrival in the US, Kadeer promptly held press conferences and granted interviews shedding light on the plight of the Uyghurs, which was until then a relatively obscure group of persecuted people. Within a year of her release, Rebiya Kadeer was dubbed the “mother of the Uyghur people,” was elected the president of the World Uyghur Congress, and effectively became the face of the Uyghur campaign for greater autonomy, a movement that had been inchoate and unknown internationally prior to Kadeer’s release.
Within the CCP, the backfiring of this human rights concession weakened the more moderate and conciliatory approach to foreign policy that Jiang Zemin’s “Shanghai clique” propounded. It helped initiate the hardline approach that would soon come to the fore under Hu Jintao. As time passed, Hu increasingly sought to secure the Party’s unchallenged sovereignty in the wake of heightened social unrest in many parts of China, most notably Tibet and Xinjiang.

The development of the Uyghur movement worried Beijing tremendously, as it came on the heels of the “color revolutions” that swept across post-Soviet Russia beginning in 2003. The anti-authoritarian wave that swept across neighboring Kyrgyzstan during the Tulip Revolution in early 2005 was particularly troubling to the CCP.

In late May 2005, Hu Jintao issued a report at an internal conference titled “Fighting the People’s War Without Gunsmoke.” The report, disseminated in the Party down to the county level, outlined a series of measures aimed at nipping a potential popular uprising in the bud. The measures included stricter media control and censorship, and more scrutiny of human rights advocates, Falun Gong practitioners, and all NGOs. A 2005 article in Foreign Policy stated, “Beijing believes that international organizations, especially advocacy NGOs, have acted as Washington’s ‘black hands’ behind the recent regime changes in Central Asia. A recent issue of a biweekly journal run by the Communist Party Propaganda Department referred to Washington’s ‘$1 billion annual budget for global democratization’ and identified NGOs… as organizations that ‘brainwash’ local people and train political oppositions.”

The rise of Hu and wane of Jiang had a significant effect on Beijing’s Tibet policy, particularly with regard to the dialogue. Jiang was largely responsible for pushing forward resumption in talks in 1997 and 2002. His retirement therefore signaled the loss of a major proponent for engaging the Dalai Lama, and its effect on the dialogue was immediately apparent.
In the first round of the Sino-Tibetan dialogue after Jiang’s complete retirement, the UFWD head Liu Yandong was conspicuously absent, leaving the deputy head Zhu Weiqun in charge of negotiations with Lodi Gyari and Kelsang Gyaltsen. The fourth round, held in June 2005, reflected respect for the agreements reached in the third round: the talks were held outside China in Bern, Switzerland, and the Tibetan delegation included the Tibetan exile official Ngapa Tsegyam. However, Gyari’s statement upon his return explicitly stated that Tsegyam participated in the capacity of a senior assistant to the two envoys. This indicated Beijing’s continued wariness towards, and refusal to acknowledge, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.

Both sides continued to express good faith in the dialogue, agreeing to meet again. Both sides acknowledged that while differences remained between the two, they hoped continued engagement would bridge that gap.

The fifth round occurred in February 2006 in Guilin City. Envoys Gyari and Gyaltsen met once again with UFWD deputy head Zhu Weiqun, and head Liu Yandong was absent once again, as was the Tibetan leader Ngapa Tsegyam. Upon his return, Gyari issued his briefest and least optimistic assessment of the dialogue up to that point. He stated, “There is a major difference even in the approach in addressing the issue.” The Tibetan envoys were especially upset at their inability to meet with ordinary Tibetans who were shooed away by Chinese security police whenever they attempted to meet the envoys.

Gyari’s statement reflected growing frustration with the talks’ failure to reach an agreement on the basis of negotiations, and thus move past the stage of “pre-negotiations,” or “talks about talks.” The Dalai Lama’s envoys continued to push for his Middle Way Approach, while the Chinese side sought to contain the scope of negotiations to the “personal status of the Dalai Lama,” that is, the conditions under which he could return to China.
According to Chinese and Tibetan officials close to the talks, the Chinese government has kept their five-point proposal for the return of the Dalai Lama as the basis for talks.\textsuperscript{18} However, the Dalai Lama has consistently held that the Tibet question is about the welfare and wellbeing of the Tibetans living inside China. With the increasingly hardline approach to Tibet and foreign policy under Hu Jintao’s leadership, the failure to establish an agreed-upon basis for negotiations reinforced the perception that the Sino-Tibetan dialogue is less about resolving the Tibet question by reaching an accommodation with the Dalai Lama and more about managing international criticism, symbolized by the preconditions that the Dalai Lama must meet in order to continue dialogue.

In an August 2005 Politburo meeting, Hu Jintao declared that “the ethnic regional autonomy system has been continually consolidated and perfected, and the people of all ethnic groups fully enjoy their rights as masters of the country.”\textsuperscript{19} This reflected the Party’s unwillingness to discuss autonomy with the Dalai Lama, as well as its strengthened commitment to a Tibet policy that sought stability through repressive activities, rapid economic development and modernization. In 2006, the CCP affirmed its commitment to this policy by appointing the hardline cadre Zhang Qingli as TAR Party Secretary, and completing the construction of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, which signified the achievement of a “Great Western Development” goal to link Tibet to the rest of China.

Zhang Qingli’s appointment and the new railway, coupled with government initiatives to bolster the Tibetan economy through construction and tourism, encouraged Han migration to the TAR. This compounded anti-government sentiment and racial tension among local Tibetans, who felt outraged and economically marginalized as the CCP doled out contracts to Han
migrants to construct projects that impacted the fragile environment of the Tibetan plateau and forced the resettlement of traditional nomads.

As Tibetan dissent grew, the formal endorsement of Hu Jintao’s “harmonious society” doctrine in October 2006 further entrenched social stability in the CCP’s overall strategy. The endorsement came on the heels of the ousting of Chen Liangyu, a protégé of Jiang Zemin and a member of the “Shanghai clique,” and thus highlighted Hu’s increasing power. While Deng and Jiang advocated for unfettered economic growth, Hu paid more attention to addressing festering social tensions and stabilizing the country at a time when so-called “mass incidents” — unauthorized protests — were taking place in ever increasing numbers.

For Dharamsala, these developments signified the further entrenchment of a Tibet policy it disapproved of—one that the Dalai Lama’s envoys sought to redress at the negotiation table. Dharamsala’s response was to increase efforts to promote the Tibet cause internationally in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

In September 2006, the US Congress announced it would bestow upon the Dalai Lama its highest civilian award: the Congressional Gold Medal. In response, the CCP criticized the US government, and intensified its anti-Dalai Lama rhetoric. Zhang Qingli was an outspoken critic of the Dalai Lama from the outset of his tenure as TAR Party Secretary, and he heaped on the invective.

Zhang was a major proponent of the “harmonious society” doctrine and sought to strengthen the CCP’s grip on the region through anti-Dalai Lama campaigns. Under Zhang, the TAR government expanded these campaigns to include the mandatory patriotic reeducation of many Tibetan monasteries and nunneries. Additionally, the 2006 TAR Implementing Measures for the Regulation on Religious Affairs, which took effect in early 2007, compounded religious
repression in Tibet. The 2007 Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhists in Tibetan Buddhism further flamed anti-government sentiment while empowering the CCP to control the succession of influential lama lineages, thus gradually reshaping the face of Tibetan Buddhism.\(^{21}\)

In late June 2007, Lodi Gyari and Kelsang Gyaltsen traveled to China for the sixth round of the Sino-Tibetan dialogue. They met with UFWD deputy head Zhu Weiqun and UFWD Seventh Bureau Director Sithar. Gyari issued his briefest assessment of the talks up until that point, describing the dialogue as having reached a “critical stage.” Instead of ending on an optimistic note, Gyari concluded, “We conveyed our serious concerns in the strongest possible manner on the overall Tibetan issue and made some concrete proposals for implementation if our dialogue process is to go forward.”\(^{22}\)

Instead of redressing these grievances, the CCP further indicated its commitment to its hard Tibet policy by promoting Liu Yandong to the Politburo and Zhou Yongkang to the Standing Committee in late 2007. Beginning in 2002, the two were deputy leaders of the “Central Tibet Work Coordination Group,” which had “overall charge of Tibetan affairs” and whose main tasks were “opposing the Dalai clique and maintaining Tibet’s stability.”\(^{23}\) Their promotions were therefore endorsements of their work from 2002 to 2007.

Under Zhou’s leadership from 1999 to 2002, the Sichuan Province government detained or imprisoned nearly 200 Tibetans. In 2002, Zhou ordered the arrest of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche on trumped-up charges of involvement in a bombing conspiracy. The rinpoche, one of the most respected religious figures among Tibetans, was sentenced to death with two-year reprieve, which was eventually commuted to life imprisonment. After Zhou went to Beijing to take up the top public security post from 2002 to 2007, Tibetan areas saw a greater security presence. Zhou’s
rise to the CCP’s most powerful political body therefore signified a stronger commitment to ensuring social stability through the suppression of dissent and increased surveillance. The CCP attached further importance to social harmony in the run-up to the August 2008 Olympics, which it viewed as an opportunity to bolster its international standing and legitimacy in China. The Party wanted nothing to interfere with its exploitation of this opportunity.

When Tibetans gathered in the Lhasa streets on March 10, 2008 to commemorate the 1959 Uprising, the Chinese security forces initially took a restrained approach, generally avoiding confrontation that could result in casualties and detentions. However, as the week wore on, the protests continued and escalated. When the police dispersed a peaceful demonstration near Ramoche Temple on March 14, Tibetans began rioting, setting police cars on fire, attacking Han and Hui civilians, and burning down Han- and Hui-owned businesses. The TAR government reported the deaths of 16 civilians as a result of the riots. The subsequent Chinese suppression of the Lhasa riots resulted in approximately 80 Tibetan casualties and widespread detentions, including a campaign of house-to-house searches.24

On March 15, the protests spread beyond the TAR to Gansu Province. These protests were centered around Labrang Monastery, and quickly escalated to violence, leading to police suppression, which resulted in Han and Hui casualties, and Tibetan deaths and arrests. On March 16, Tibetan monks staged a protest in Ngawa TAP, Sichuan Province. The monks and police clashed, and at least one policeman died, with an unverified claim of seven to 30 Tibetans civilian casualties.

The CCP blamed the “Dalai clique,” specifically international human rights and Tibetan NGOs, for organizing and instigating the so-called “March 14” riots. In its accusation, the CCP primarily focused on the formation of an alliance of Tibetan NGOs, which included the Tibetan
Youth Congress (TYC), in January 2008 that sought to revive the “spirit” of the 1959 Uprising. Yet this alliance advocated “nonviolent direct action,” and the Dalai Lama also consistently denounced the use of violence in protests. Nonetheless, the bourgeoning alliance confirmed the Party’s suspicion of foreign NGOs.

In the wake of the stalled dialogue, the Dalai Lama’s annual March 10 speech was far more critical of the CCP, and expressed more frustration with the situation in Tibet than he had in previous years’ speeches. While this may have emboldened the protestors, the March 14 events were more indicative of deep-seated anti-government sentiment and festering ethnic tension. Moreover, protestors sought to take full advantage of the increased international attention afforded to China as result of the upcoming Olympic games.

On March 18, 2008, the Dalai Lama decried the violent protests in Tibet, and threatened to resign as leader of the exile government if the bloodshed wasn’t reigned in. Following the announcement, the violence subsided—not just in the TAR, but in all Tibetan areas. The protests, a vast majority of which was led by monks, continued peacefully however. The CCP continued detaining protestors and bolstered its security forces in all the restive regions. By early April 2008, there were a reported 4,400 detained in protests that had occurred in the whole of the TAR and 37 TAPs in Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan provinces.

China faced mounting international condemnations as hundreds of Tibetan exiles and supporters protested PRC embassies around the world. The Olympic torch relay during March and April was a public relations disaster from the outset: a protestor supporting Tibet attempted to raise a banner during the torch’s lighting; the torch was nearly seized and extinguished on its way through London and Paris; and in San Francisco, two large banners declaring “Free Tibet” were unfurled on the Golden Gate Bridge.
The continued protests inside and outside China afforded the Dalai Lama and his international campaign more meetings with foreign governments as well as increased media attention. The Dalai Lama took these opportunities to reemphasize his commitment to resolving the Tibet issue nonviolently and through dialogue with the Chinese government. In an effort to express his sincerity, he restated his condemnations of both the use of violence and boycotting the Olympic games. The CCP reciprocated by reopening of dialogue, but its goal was by now clear: to “manage” the Tibet question, not to solve it.

In early May 2008, Lodi Gyari and Kelsang Gyaltsen traveled to China to meet informally with UFWD senior officials Zhu Weiqun and Sithar. The two sides discussed the urgent issue of the crisis in Tibet and agreed to continue the dialogue through a formal seventh round at a later date. Because the foundation of US foreign policy with regard to Tibet is the promotion of a substantive dialogue between the CCP and the Dalai Lama, the resumption of dialogue was intended to reduce external pressure on China as the Party continued to bolster its security to subdue internal unrest.

The Great Sichuan Earthquake on May 12, 2008 considerably reduced international pressure on China’s human rights record, as foreign governments expressed their condolences for the tragic loss of life and provided relief aid for rescue and rebuilding efforts. And although Beijing continued its anti-Dalai Lama rhetoric, it nonetheless signaled an openness and willingness to engage with the Dalai Lama by honoring its commitment to host a formal round of the dialogue prior to the staging of the Olympic games.

The official seventh round, from June 30 to July 3, included the first meeting between the Dalai Lama’s envoys and UFWD head Du Qinglin. Gyari and Gyaltsen also continued their correspondence with UFWD deputy head Zhu Weiqun and senior official Sithar. The round
again failed to produce any substantive agreement, and Gyari’s statement upon his return indicated that both sides had yet to reach convergence on the basis of negotiations—that is, the personal status of the Dalai Lama versus the welfare of Tibetans in China. Gyari’s statement acknowledged that their relationship with the Chinese had reached “a crucial time,” and that “in the absence of serious and sincere commitment on their part, the continuation of the present dialogue process would serve no purpose.”

During the seventh round, the Chinese side presented the Dalai Lama’s envoys with new preconditions for the Dalai Lama to satisfy, which it called the “four no supports”:

1. No support for activities that aimed to disturb and sabotage the Beijing Olympic games;
2. No support for and making no attempt to conspire and incite violent criminal activities;
3. No support for and taking earnest steps to check the violent terrorist activities of the Tibetan Youth Congress; and
4. No support for any propositions or activities that sought to achieve “Tibet independence” and split the motherland.

In his press statement following the seventh round, Gyari rejected the necessity of these preconditions, asserting that the Dalai Lama’s positions already satisfied them: “His Holiness and the Tibetan struggle are universally acknowledged and appreciated for consistently rejecting and opposing such acts.” His statement also referenced the Chinese rejection of a proposed joint statement committing the two parties to the continuation of the dialogue process. Despite the negotiations’ apparent deadlock, the two sides agreed to meet again in October, after the conclusion of the Olympic games.

During the seventh round, Du Qinglin explicitly invited suggestions from the Dalai Lama for the stability and development of Tibet, and Zhu Weiqun asked for the Dalai Lama to submit his views on the degree or form of autonomy he was seeking. In the eyes of keen observers of Tibet like Columbia University’s Robert Barnett, this invitation amounted to a setup:
negotiations never discuss the specifics until general principles have been agreed upon. But for the Dalai Lama not to submit anything would have been disrespectful and an explicit show of bad faith in the dialogue process, which the CCP could then reprimand him for.

Thus, the Dalai Lama’s envoys submitted the “Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People” during the eighth round of the dialogue from October 31 to November 5, 2008. The Memorandum was a detailed elaboration of the Dalai Lama’s Middle Way Approach that analyzed the Tibetan position as compatible with the PRC Constitution and the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law (REAL).

The Memorandum reiterated the Middle Way Approach’s call for the coalescence of a greater ethnic Tibet (comprising the TAR and TAPs in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces) into a single political entity, and invoked articles in both the PRC Constitution and REAL that could support such a change. Furthermore, the Memorandum insisted that this political entity would not seek independence from the PRC, but would enjoy the status of “genuine national regional autonomy” and would be governed by democratically-elected legislative and executive branches, as well as possessing an independent judicial system.

The CCP immediately rejected and denounced the Memorandum as a disguised form of independence, just as it had done with all previous iterations of the Middle Way Approach. In a press statement the day after the eighth round’s conclusion, UFWD head Du Qinglin said that “at no time under no circumstances” would China tolerate “the slightest wavering or deviation” on the issue of “safeguarding national unification and territorial integrity.” On November 10, 2008, UFWD deputy head Zhu Weiqun described the creation of a greater Tibet to be “impossible,” and framed the Memorandum as an attempt “to deny, restrict and weaken the powers of the Central authorities.” Both Du and Zhu stated that the Dalai Lama had directly
contradicted the “four no supports,” and continued to urge him to fulfill these preconditions. Following the eighth round, prospects for continuing the dialogue appeared bleak, and in 2009, both sides acknowledged that it had reached a deadlock.

The March 2008 riots therefore reinforced Beijing’s efforts in Tibet to subdue dissent, increase religious surveillance, and discredit the Dalai Lama. In the wake of the 2008 protests, the CCP bolstered its security presence in all affected areas, and also dispatched thousands of cadres to monasteries in the TAR and TAPs to conduct patriotic reeducation. The number and frequency of patriotic reeducation campaigns increased in general, and became far more prevalent around the time of sensitive dates such as March 10. These campaigns sought to discredit the Dalai Lama as leader of the Tibetan religious community, which had led the majority of the 2008 protests.

Furthermore, while promoting its commitment to a policy of rapid economic development, Beijing used increasing virulence to portray the Dalai Lama as the chief obstruction to Tibet’s stability and development. A stable and harmonious society was a prerequisite to economic growth, and the CCP under Hu Jintao’s leadership sought to achieve both ends in order to further China’s international image, which had risen significantly following the success of the Olympics. The PRC’s growing international prominence and surging economy, coupled with the US recession, influenced President Barack Obama’s foreign policy and particularly his China policy during his first year in office.

In February 2009, on her first China visit as US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton signaled an increased commitment to strengthening Sino-American ties, which she considered to be the world’s most important relationship of the 21st century. She spoke in passing on the issues of human rights and Tibet, noting the two countries had fundamental disagreements, but
indicated that they would come second to economic and military interests: “Our pressing on those issues can’t interfere on the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crisis.”

Clinton’s remarks reflected America’s early efforts to engage China in order to strengthen economic ties and contain the national security threats of Iran and North Korea. Obama’s November 2009 visit to China sought further progress on these issues; however, the trip’s success faced an obstacle in the Dalai Lama’s scheduled visit to Washington in October. In early 2009, the Dalai Lama’s representatives had informed the Obama administration of the visit, and indicated its expectation that the president meet with him, just as the previous three presidents had. However, Obama’s national security team was cognizant of the collateral damage such a meeting would have in the run-up to Obama’s inaugural trip to China.

According to Jeffrey Bader, formerly in charge of the National Security Council’s Asia policy under the Obama administration, Beijing had informed Washington officials privately that a presidential meeting with the Dalai Lama would have “grave, unspecified consequences for the US-China relationship and for the visit.” Moreover, “throughout 2009 the Chinese had consistently singled out this issue as the one posing the greatest immediate threat to the relationship.”

Washington therefore signaled to Dharamsala that a meeting could not take place in October. However, in an effort to preclude domestic condemnations of its China policy as appeasement, the Obama administration sent Valerie Jarrett, assistant to the president for intergovernmental affairs, to Dharamsala in September, and sought assurances from the Chinese to resume the Sino-Tibetan dialogue. “The Chinese refused to make an explicit commitment,”
writes Bader, “but sent unmistakable signals they would meet with the Dalai Lama’s representative after Obama’s visit to China.”

Beijing would in fact reciprocate Washington’s gesture by hosting the ninth round of the dialogue in January 2010. This reflected yet again the tactic of making human rights concessions when it sought something in the international arena—in this case, Obama’s canceled meeting with the Dalai Lama. While external pressure had contributed to the resumption of the dialogue in 2008 and 2010, it could not affect substantive change to Beijing’s Tibet policy—in part because foreign governments’ primary recommendation on Tibet is resumption in dialogue, and in part because the CCP classifies critiques of its Tibet policy as interference in internal affairs.

The ninth and final round in January 2010 confirmed the inefficacy of the dialogue. It failed yet again to produce any substantive agreement as both sides reiterated their key positions. The Dalai Lama’s two envoys met with UFWD head Du Qinglin and deputy head Zhu Weiqun, and submitted a note that affirmed the Dalai Lama’s commitment to the Memorandum and also addressed Chinese criticism of the proposal. In a press conference following the ninth round, Zhu rejected the note, and reiterated the CCP’s refusal to discuss anything but the Dalai Lama’s personal status.

The ninth round came on the heels of the Fifth Tibet Work Forum, which convened in Beijing from January 18 to 20, 2010, and was presided over by Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. The Forum outlined the Party’s goals for the next ten years, reaffirming its commitment to policies of rapid economic growth and social stability, while increasing anti-Dalai Lama rhetoric. Most significantly, the Forum expanded the implementation of Tibet policy initiatives from just the TAR, to TAPs in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces.
Beijing’s expanded Tibet policy codified the heightened religious monitoring and increased security presence that had been initiated in the TAPs in the wake of the 2008 protests. It engendered significant resentment in the TAPs, resentment that fueled the wave of self-immolations that continue as this thesis is written. It is no coincidence that virtually all of the three-dozen self-immolations since March 2011 have taken place outside of the TAR.

Conclusion

Incidentally, the Fifth Tibet Work Forum produced significant convergence with the Dalai Lama’s Middle Way Approach. The expanded and contiguous Tibetan autonomous territories brought together under the new policy now match the areas that the Dalai Lama’s representatives have sought to discuss with the CCP as “Greater Tibet,” or “Historic Tibet.” In the past, the two sides have converged on other issues: both recognize the uniqueness of the Tibetan culture; both sides have repeatedly expressed that independence is not required; and both sides agree that Tibet has been or should be given autonomy. Yet, convergences and concessions on either side have failed to move the dialogue beyond the pre-negotiation stage of “talks about talks.”

The current impasse in the dialogue, which is the longest since talks resumed in 2002, reflects a fundamental discord between the two sides as to how they perceive the Tibet question and what role the dialogue should play in resolving that question. The Dalai Lama has consistently stated that the Tibet question is about the welfare and wellbeing of the six million Tibetans living in China, whose unique religion and culture he has thus far sought to preserve through greater autonomy. Secondary to this has been his return to China, which is the primary
subject of negotiations in the Party’s eyes. During the dialogue from 2002 to 2010, the CCP has become increasingly rigid in its demand to only discuss the Dalai Lama’s “personal status,” that is, his return to China.

In June 2011, envoy Kelsang Gyaltsen told me that the Tibetan negotiating team has considered narrowing the discussion to just the status of the Dalai Lama with the hope that this concession would allow the conversation to organically open up to the issues of autonomy and policy.¹ The prevailing notion not to make this concession reflects the Tibetan side’s deep-seated mistrust of the CCP, as well as its cognizance that the Dalai Lama’s ability to pressure Beijing relies entirely on his remaining outside of China.

As long as the Dalai Lama remains in exile, external pressure on the CCP to redress its Tibet policy through dialogue will persist. China’s growing international prominence has served to minimize even further the impact of external pressure, which has produced few if any changes with regard to Beijing’s Tibet policy. In fact, the Dalai Lama’s international campaign since 1987 has served to strengthen the more hardline elements within the CCP leadership who are fearful that reforms will weaken the Party’s grip on Tibet. Beginning with the CCP’s 1989 assertion that the reforms initiated by then Party Secretary Hu Yaobang were a mistake, if not a failure, the consolidation of hardline policymakers’ power within the Party leadership under Hu Jintao – the man who imposed martial law in Tibet – has made its Tibet position more intractable than ever.

The reform era under Hu Yaobang’s leadership represented the greatest opportunity for reaching a bipartite resolution on the Tibet question. During this period, the CCP endorsed a moderate approach to reinforcing its unchallenged rule in Tibet, guided by the belief that its authority was partly contingent on Tibetan acceptance of Chinese rule. In order to reinforce its
popular mandate in Tibet, the Party engaged the Dalai Lama in negotiations, initially under just one precondition iterated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978: “Except independence, all other issues can be discussed.” Just how far the CCP currently is from that position can be expressed in the short, straightforward response a Chinese senior official provided to my question about Tibet policy during the reform era of the 1980s: “We [the CCP] do not talk about Hu Yaobang.”

The Tibetan protests from 1987 to 1989 irrevocably altered Beijing’s approach to securing its sovereignty in Tibet, as the Party linked unrest to heightened Tibetan nationalism as a result of liberal policies and international support. In the wake of this instability, and with Hu Yaobang stripped of his position as Party Secretary, the CCP tightened religious restrictions, increased its security presence, isolated the Dalai Lama and purged moderate cadres in favor of more hardline officials.

Since 1989, domestic unrest – especially in ethnic minority areas – and foreign pressure have served to strengthen this hardline approach to Tibet. In the 1990s, the US addressed Beijing’s policy of isolating the Dalai Lama by categorizing Tibet as a human rights issue in its comprehensive China policy. American pressure has produced the release of important Tibetan prisoners (several of whom have gone into exile, further minimizing the impact) and dialogue with the Dalai Lama. But the impetus for releasing prisoners and agreeing to the dialogue was Jiang Zemin’s desire to bolster Sino-American relations, evidenced by the lack of substantive change to the rest of Beijing’s Tibet policy. China’s rapid rise as an international superpower has reduced the need to placate foreign pressure. That said, the CCP under Hu Jintao’s leadership has increasingly used the Sino-Tibetan dialogue – the mere holding of “talks about talks” – to achieve specific goals like smooth foreign visits and the successful staging of international events.
The most prominent example of this cynical policy was the 2008 resumption in dialogue following the widespread protests across the Tibetan plateau. The 2008 rounds were aimed solely at securing the success of the Olympics. A number of foreign leaders, including Gordon Brown of the United Kingdom and Angela Merkel of Germany, had threatened to boycott the Games’ opening ceremony in large part as a reaction to the events in Tibet, and the announcement of the 2008 rounds of dialogue assuaged their concerns. Furthermore, in accommodating the Dalai Lama, the CCP reciprocated his public denouncement of violence and his disavowal of international boycotts in the lead-up to the Olympic games. The March 2008 protests had spread like wildfire across the Tibetan plateau, catching the CCP completely off guard in Tibetan areas outside of Lhasa. The Dalai Lama’s denunciation of the March 14 riots effectively halted the violent nature of these protests not just in the TAR, but also in the TAPs, thus providing the CCP with a window to quickly stabilize the restive regions.

The Tibetan demonstrations that began in 2011 bear a striking resemblance to the events of 2008, but utilize self-immolation. The religious community has yet again been at the forefront of the self-immolations, which initially protested religious repression in specific monasteries, such as Kirti. The government suppression of these demonstrations, generally through widespread detention, has once again stimulated Tibetan laypeople to join the protests, which have now expanded to address a wide range of grievances at the hands of the CCP. The protests and subsequent government suppression have provoked international condemnations of Beijing’s Tibet policy, which has further emboldened the protestors and also reinforced attitudes among hardline cadres in the Party leadership.

However, there is a key difference between the current string of self-immolations and the 2008 protests: expanded surveillance, more effective controls over the Internet, and larger
security presences in all Tibetan areas have prepared the CCP to weather the unrest. Another significant departure is that the Dalai Lama has not categorically rejected the protests, as he did in 2008. While he has denounced self-immolations as contrary to Buddhist practice, he has also acknowledged the “desperate” situation in Tibet as a result of hardline officials’ policy of “cultural genocide.”

Foreign governments continue to pressure Beijing to reexamine its Tibet policy and address the legitimate concerns of the Tibetan people through the resumption of dialogue with the Dalai Lama and his representatives. However, the CCP has countered by invoking the Dalai Lama’s failure to meet the precondition that he stop all activities aimed at splitting the motherland. The CCP requires stability in Tibetan areas before it will consider reopening the Sino-Tibetan dialogue. As a senior Chinese official said, “It’s a negative cycle,” or vicious cycle. From the Party’s perspective, any concession in the present environment of social unrest, such as resumption in the dialogue or a change in Tibet policy, would only encourage more self-immolations and protests for the purpose of gaining further concessions.

Nonetheless, the CCP is at pains to reiterate its openness to the principle of dialogue so long as the Dalai Lama meets their preconditions. A senior Chinese official stated that the main reason for the current impasse is the exile government’s continued involvement in the talks. Beginning in 2011, the Dalai Lama and his representatives made gestures that appear to have been aimed at mitigating this impediment to further talks.

On August 15, 2011, the Dalai Lama formally gave up his position as the political leader of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA; formerly the Tibetan Government-in-Exile). His political retirement was formalized in the CTA’s new constitution, which delegated all executive power to the democratically-elected Kalon Tripa, or prime minister, and divides the Dalai
Lama’s previous administrative duties between the Parliament and the Kalon Tripa. These changes were designed in part to overcome one of the largest obstacles to the dialogue’s progress, and in part to mitigate, if not preclude, the CCP’s condemnations of the Dalai Lama’s meetings with foreign leaders, as he is no longer an official of a government that Beijing refuses to recognize. At the same time as the change in the Dalai Lama’s status was announced, his two envoys took steps to disassociate themselves with the Government-in-Exile in Dharamsala.

The CCP didn’t buy it, however, asserting that the Dalai Lama has not truly given up his political role in the exile government. A senior Chinese official called his retirement illegitimate, citing his continued visits with foreign governments and the exile government’s new constitution, which still affords the spiritual leader considerable political power as “protector and symbol” of Tibet and Tibetans everywhere.6

At the same time, these developments served to democratize and politicize the Tibetan Diaspora. A higher percentage of voters turned out for last year’s Kalon Tripa election than in years past, and the victory of the young and charismatic Lobsang Sangay symbolized a generational shift within the exile community. Theoretically, these developments increase pressure on China to engage with the Dalai Lama because it is now less certain that the exile project will collapse with his passing.

The Dalai Lama has sought to further this prospect by threatening to recognize his reincarnation before he dies – perhaps through a democratic process – or to identify his reincarnation outside of China. These announcements have renewed debates within the CCP between hardline officials, who believe that the Dalai Lama can never be trusted, and more moderate officials, who believe that he represents China’s best opportunity to resolve the Tibet issue now.7
Identifying just who these moderate officials are, however, is no easy task. One of them could well be Premier Wen Jiabao, who has generally refrained from attacking the Dalai Lama on his trips abroad, and who took the unusual step of expressing sympathy for Tibetans who had immolated themselves in a March 14, 2012 press conference. After criticizing the Dalai Lama for stirring up dissatisfaction, Wen stated, “The young Tibetans are innocent and we feel deeply pained by this behavior.”

In the same press conference, Wen spoke out for political reform, warning that failure to undertake political reform could return China to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. This was not the first time Wen had spoken in favor of political reform. His doing so at an event in which he expressed sympathy for Tibetans suggests a connection between support for political reform and support for a more moderate approach to the Tibetan question.

Wen will step down from the Standing Committee of the Politburo at the upcoming 18th National Congress this September. The old guard – including Zhou Yongkang whose tenure in Sichuan revealed a distinctly anti-Tibetan bias – will also step down, and a new Party leadership will be unveiled—a leadership that, barring unforeseen circumstances, will rule the country for a ten-year period from 2012 to 2022. Prospects for a smooth transition were thrown into disarray with the dismissal and subsequent detention of Bo Xilai, who was a leading candidate for a seat on the Standing Committee. Bo made a name for himself in Chongqing by taking a hard line on crime and dissent, and by favoring greater controls over the media while pursuing populist policies in other areas. He forged close relations with the PLA and in particular with the generals in charge of the Chengdu Military Region which oversees Tibet. For these reasons, the Dalai Lama has welcomed Bo’s departure, calling it a “hopeful sign” in recent remarks.
As of this writing in April 2012, internal Chinese government documents have leaked that place Bo at the center of a wiretapping scandal and a widespread program of bugging across Chongqing, confirmed by several CCP officials speaking anonymously. According to allegations that are unable to verify, the Chongqing government under Bo even attempted to wiretap Hu Jintao and even Zhou Yongkang, who had supported the charismatic provincial secretary as a potential successor on the Standing Committee as well as head of the Central Committee’s Political-Legal Committee in overall charge of maintaining stability. These developments reinforce the perception of a profound degree of political jockeying and mistrust within the Party.

The succession picture remains cloudy. It is widely assumed that Xi Jinping will assume Hu Jintao’s position as general secretary and that Li Keqiang will take over Wen Jiabao’s position as premier in March 2013. However, below these two positions uncertainty reigns. The Dalai Lama himself is said to believe that Xi’s ascendancy will be good for Tibet, recalling that his father Xi Zhongxun had a relatively enlightened position on Tibet. However, both Chinese officials and foreign scholars heap scorn on this idea. A senior Chinese official stated that the upcoming leadership transition would have no impact on Tibet policy, as the Fifth Forum has laid out Beijing’s initiatives until 2020. And foreign scholars and government officials cite Xi’s record as party secretary in Zhejiang to indicate that he will pursue tough policies when dealing with what the Party perceives as threats to its grip on power. In Zhejiang, Xi oversaw the most widespread suppression of the China Democracy Party and initiated a widely reported campaign to demolish so-called “house churches.” One core argument of this thesis – that political instability in China has provided a tendency toward a hard line on Tibet – suggests that these are not propitious times for reaching accommodation with the Dalai Lama.
This thesis has also argued that external pressure on China to change its policies toward Tibet has been of limited value, and on occasion, has led to a hardening of attitudes at the top of the Party structure. While external pressure has contributed to some notable political prisoner releases, it has not reduced the overall number of Tibetan political prisoners. It has also led to a series of dialogue rounds that have had virtually no effect on China’s Tibet policy. On the other hand, improvement in conditions in Tibet has coincided with the pursuit of economic and limited political reform by China’s leaders.

In August 2011, the CCP moved the hardline Zhang Qingli from Lhasa to Hebei Province, replacing him with Chen Quanguo. The move was a lateral transfer for Zhang, who retained his standing as a provincial party secretary, and something of a promotion for Chen, who had been governor of Hebei. While Hebei has the largest population of Catholics in China, and most are members of underground churches, it is too early to say if the transfer was tied to a perceived need to stabilize the restive Catholic population in Hebei. It is also too early to say what impact Chen’s appointment will have on Tibet. Thus far, he has been less vocal about the Dalai Lama than Zhang, and his economic background suggests a commitment to carrying out the economic development initiatives of the Fifth Forum. Nonetheless, Tibet policy with regard to stability and harmony, as well as engagement with the Dalai Lama, remains firmly in the hands of those at the top of the CCP leadership.

The upcoming Party Congress represents an opportunity to move toward a successful resolution of the Tibet question, specifically with regard to greater autonomy for Tibetans, more protection for their unique culture and religion, and the return of the Dalai Lama. It is vital that Party leaders who have established themselves as proponents of political and legal reform, and who have favored a less heavy-handed approach when dealing with dissent and protest win
positions on the Standing Committee of the Politburo as well as the Politburo itself and the larger central committee.

Who might such leaders be? Three possibilities that come to mind are Wang Yang, party secretary of Guangdong Province, Li Yuanchao, head of the Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee, and Yu Zhengsheng, party secretary of Shanghai Municipality.

Wang Yang is seen as the proponent of a more liberal, “pro-reform” approach to both economic and political issues, so much so that some have referred to his approach as the “Guangdong Model” in contrast to Bo Xilai’s “Chongqing Model.” There have been very few prosecutions of dissidents in Guangdong during Wang’s tenure. He criticized the self-congratulatory tone of the country’s 60th anniversary celebrations in 2009, pointing out that much work must be done to improve people’s livelihoods. Most notably, he oversaw the handling of the recent Wukan Village uprising in which peasants threw out the local party leadership and demanded free and fair elections. Instead of ordering the revolt’s suppression and restoring the village’s Party leaders, Wang acquiesced to their demands and ordered new elections.

Another possible proponent of greater reform and tolerance is Li Yuanchao, former party secretary of Jiangsu Province who was also known for his relatively light touch in dealing with dissent and mass incidents. Li is currently head of the Organization Department of the CCP’s Central Committee; it was he who was dispatched to Chongqing to advise local cadres of Bo Xilai’s demise. In the early 1990s, Li was the principal official charged with handling requests for information and clemency for political prisoners, including a number of Tibetans. In his capacity as Deputy Director of the State Council Information Office, Li worked closely with human rights activist John Kamm to this end.
Yu Zhengsheng is another candidate for the Standing Committee. While serving as mayor of Qingdao, Yu personally oversaw some of China’s first industrial joint ventures with foreign companies. As party secretary in Shanghai, he has also favored a more conciliatory approach in dealing with mass incidents. During his tenure, there have been relatively few instances of political trials, and the city is a model of transparency in its legal system.

Yet irrespective of what Standing Committee candidates like Wang, Li and Yu might have in mind for reform in Tibet and the rest of China, they face heavy constraints. The composition of the Standing Committee will probably reflect a balancing of personalities, some moderate, others more hardline. Xi is seen as a proponent of pursuing the “harmonious society” policies that have reigned in recent years. He could well be joined on the Standing Committee by party secretaries that have exhibited a greater reliance on suppression rather than negotiations in dealing with social unrest. One must also take into consideration the PLA, within whose ranks there is no discernible impulse for changing Tibet policy. On the contrary, moves to loosen the Party’s grip on Tibet will almost certainly engender strong resistance in the PLA.

Instead of passing toothless resolutions in their legislatures and repeatedly calling for resumption of a “talk shop” dialogue that has not produced a single substantial result, foreign leaders genuinely concerned about Tibet’s future should identify and cultivate relations with a new generation of Chinese leaders who might be disposed to policies that could move the Tibetan issue in the direction of resolution. In identifying such leaders, Western politicians should be mindful of the constraints they face and tailor their approaches accordingly. At the same time, foreign leaders should continue to raise the Tibet issue with Party leaders such as Xi Jinping who do not appear interested in making changes to the CCP’s long-standing Tibet policy. The message should be that the Tibet question remains on the agenda of the West, and that
relations with China cannot develop to their full potential as long as the question with regard to human rights and the preservation of the Tibetan language, culture and religion remains unsolved. The point should be made that dialogue should be results-oriented, and should be held in a mutually respectful atmosphere free of preconditions.

If nothing else, this thesis establishes that Tibet’s future is irrevocably linked to China’s future, and that China’s future will be largely determined by the outcome of internal political struggles between those who favor more reform and greater tolerance for the rights of all Chinese, including ethnic minorities, and those who favor the maintenance of a system that places harmony and stability above all else. Without seeking to determine the outcome of those struggles, the West and its leaders should make clear whose side they are on.
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