

Where is China Heading on Tibet?

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Remarks by Lodi Gyaltzen Gyari to the Council on Foreign Relations Washington, DC, April 23, 2012

You know that I have been leading the Tibetan delegation for the dialogue with the Chinese government for the last many years. But I am not here today to give you a report on my progress because there is nothing new to say on that front. My last meeting with my counterparts in Beijing was in January 2010. Ever since, despite sincere and serious efforts on my part, we have been unable to reconvene. With the very critical situation in Tibet, the leadership changes both in Beijing and Dharamsala, and due to some other factors, I do not see any prospect for an early resumption, at least under my watch. However, having spent decades on this effort, I still do passionately believe that ultimately the only way for the Tibetans and Chinese to find a mutually acceptable solution for Tibet is through dialogue. I hope therefore that farsighted thinking and a resurgence of political will can prevail over intransigence among China's leaders, and I am pleased that the democratically-elected Tibetan leader Dr. Lobsang Sangay the Kalon Tripa (Chairman of the Cabinet) has repeatedly expressed a strong continuing commitment to pursue the Middle Way approach initiated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama [\[1\]](#).

Every struggle is unique. In the case of the Tibetan struggle, its uniqueness is derived from the nature of the Tibetan people, the Tibetan Buddhist culture, and the deep historical and personal bond between the Tibetans and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Even after he devolved his political authority to an elected leadership in 2011, the Dalai Lama's world view -- shaped by the extraordinary, sometimes tragic experiences of his life; the scores of world leaders, including Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Mao Zedong and other towering figures with whom he met; and his unwavering commitment to peace and non-violence -- make the person of the Dalai Lama key to bringing to a close a conflict that has endured for more than 60 years.

Today, I would like to draw attention to some emerging elements in this long conflict and to share with you my serious concern that unless these elements are taken care of, the foundation for any eventual negotiated solution may be lost.

Since I was a fairly young man, I have been privileged to serve His Holiness the Dalai Lama and, in recent years, I have been His Holiness' chief interlocutor in talks with the Chinese leadership. As a cabinet member of the Tibetan administration in exile and Special Envoy of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I have also had close interactions with leaders and officials at various levels of governments in different parts of the world. Growing up in India's environment of freedom and democracy has deeply enriched my thinking, and I have been especially fortunate to know and, in many cases, to work closely with a galaxy of Indian intellectuals and political leaders. Here in the United States, where I have been actively engaged in advancing the Tibet cause for nearly 25 years, I have also had the opportunity to know many scholars, government leaders, and officials who have handled Asia, and specifically China policy. Many of them were kind enough to extend to me their personal friendship and mentoring, such as the late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke. I have greatly benefited from the wisdom and guidance of many of these fine people. My 30 years of dealing with Chinese leaders, including with members of the Politburo of the Communist Party, has also provided me with first-hand exposure to their views and priorities, and also their concerns.

These experiences have informed my diplomacy on behalf of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and I would like to believe that I have served him and the Tibetan struggle better because of the information and access I have been given. I hope my remarks today will be received in the spirit in which others have shared their insights with me -- and as an elder Tibetan diplomat who has lived through these historic times and whose institutional memory is longer than some of those who are

less familiar with Tibet yet may be shaping Tibet policy today.

The history of relations between Tibet and China – and between Tibetans and Chinese – is complex and cannot be understood simply in the context of the relatively young People’s Republic of China. This may seem like an obvious assertion were it not for the fact that many of us do not study history sufficiently, and our friends in Beijing seem intent on convincing today’s policy-makers not only that ‘Tibet is an inalienable part of China’ but also that relations with the PRC must be predicated on a notion – incorrectly applied to Tibet – that support for the Tibetan struggle violates the ‘one China’ principle.

The present Tibet-China relationship has its roots in China’s military invasion of Tibet in 1949/50 and in the ‘Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet’^[2] imposed on the Tibetans in 1951.

At this juncture, let me turn to a number of issues that potentially affect policy choices facing governments in Asia, Europe and the United States, as well as those of the Tibetan exile leadership. These correspond with three very serious concerns I have with respect to: international behavior relating to Tibet, the possible direction of Chinese policy with respect to Tibetan autonomy, and the alarming situation in Tibet itself.

First, as I mentioned already, I wish to address a phantom cause for paralysis affecting the ability of some governments to put in place a credible and flexible policy on Tibet and the worsening situation there. This is the well known – but apparently ill understood—‘one-China’ policy invoked by the Chinese government to prevent legitimate inquiry or engagement by members of the international community with respect to Tibet.

The ‘one-China’ policy, as you must know, was created in the early 1970s as the instrument that enabled the United States to establish relations with the People’s Republic of China and maintain relations with the Republic of China on Taiwan.

Then U.S. President Richard Nixon and his national security assistant Henry Kissinger were responding to the Communist Chinese leaders’ need for assurances on U.S. policy with respect to Taiwan when they told Chinese Premier Chou Enlai and Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong that the United States was not pursuing a ‘two-Chinas’ policy. In the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué,^[3] the United States artfully acknowledged that “all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait claim that there is but one China and that Taiwan is part of China... and the United States does not challenge that position.”

This ‘one-China’ policy paved the way for the joint communiqué establishing diplomatic relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China on January 1st, 1979, and the adoption by the United States Congress of the Taiwan Relations Act^[4] that same year. Under the 1979 agreement, the United States recognizes the PRC government as the sole legal government of China, while the Taiwan Relations Act set out the nature of relations the United States would maintain with Taiwan in terms that were not inconsistent with the ‘one-China’ policy but protected the status quo and therefore the status of Taiwan, whatever that might be.

Adherence to the ‘one-China’ policy has been reiterated by successive American Administrations, sometimes making explicit reference to the communiqués mentioned above or to Taiwan’s unchanging status. Although the ‘one China’ policy was articulated in the context of US-China and US-Taiwan relations, Beijing increasingly demands that other governments with whom it establishes or maintains relations also endorse this ‘one-China’ policy.

What is the relevance of this discussion to Tibet? If one has to look for any reference point for China-Tibet relations, it is not the 1972 Shanghai communiqué, but the ‘17 Point Agreement,’ previously mentioned. In fact, the lack of relevance of the ‘one China’ policy is precisely what I would like to

address. No Tibetan government has ever claimed to be the government of China, so the application of the 'one-China' policy to Tibet – or for that matter, the PRC government's 'one China' principle that stresses the inalienability of both Taiwan and mainland China as parts of a single 'China' -- simply does not arise.

We have our differences with China's leaders when it comes to the history of Tibet and our historical independence from China but, as you well know, His Holiness the Dalai Lama's proposals and statements concerning ways to resolve the Tibetan question all envisage solutions that respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the People's Republic of China as the state is constituted today. These proposed solutions call for the exercise by Tibetans of genuine autonomy within the People's Republic of China and within the framework of its constitution – not for independence.

Yet, the PRC government vigorously pursues efforts to extend the applicability of 'one China' to Tibet and, in recent years, it has misled a number of governments into believing not only that the 'one-China' policy applies to Tibet, but that it restricts the extent to which their government officials can interact with Tibetan leaders in exile, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We believe that the intended effect of China's initiative is to limit outside governments from playing a constructive role in promoting a mutually acceptable negotiated solution for Tibet. Indeed, by accepting the applicability of 'one China' to Tibet, governments are subtly aligning themselves with the Chinese position that the Dalai Lama is trying to 'split' China.

While the PRC government is trying to intimidate some governments into believing that meeting with Tibetan exile leaders would violate the 'one-China' policy, in reality, this assertion is counter-intuitive to the policy. If there were a connection, the adherence by any government to the 'one-China' policy would have the opposite effect. Since the policy was developed precisely to make it possible for the United States to continue to conduct relations with Taiwan while recognizing the PRC government as the sole government of China, if the policy were at all relevant to Tibet, it then should enable governments to conduct relations with the Tibetan exile leadership and His Holiness the Dalai Lama without incurring Beijing's displeasure.

Ironically for the Chinese assertion, the United States Government actually directs its officials, through the implementation of the Tibetan Policy Act^[5] to "maintain close contact with religious, cultural and political leaders of the Tibetan people..." Those European and other foreign ministry officials, or their advisors, who uncritically accept Beijing's opposite argument should do proper analysis before they caution their own political leaders not to cross this non-existent line on Tibet.

Every government has the right to engage with the Tibetan leadership without affecting its solemn adherence to the 'one-China' policy and, I would argue, even has the duty – out of self-interest and in the interest of global peace – to promote a peaceful solution to the issue by engaging with both sides in the conflict. With the transfer of power in Dharamsala, it is critical that governments are prepared to look ahead and make policy decisions based on direct relations with the new democratically elected leadership whose authority is derived directly from the Tibetan people in exile and is seen by Tibetans inside Tibet to be derived directly from His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

I need not tell you that Tibet is situated in a strategically important place in Asia, at its very heart between the two largest populations of the world (the Chinese and the Indian), and it shares its remaining border with the Islamic populations of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. One also must not lose sight of the importance of the Tibetan plateau as the 'third pole' or the Earth's third largest store of ice. And, as climate change continues or even accelerates the melting of Tibet's glaciers, water issues originating in Tibet will have effects that resonate far beyond, impacting both the water supply for billions of people and the atmospheric circulation over much of the planet.

Instability on the Tibetan plateau can therefore have wide ramifications. It should be considered too that the kind of violent extremism we are seeing in other parts of the world is not seen in Tibet where His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the tenets of the Tibetan Buddhist culture -- struggling

against great odds to survive -- have been moderating factors against the destabilizing and potentially dangerous effects of hate propaganda, increasing tensions and economic inequalities between Tibetans and Chinese, and other risk factors in Tibet. Governments and world leaders seen to engage with Tibetans, especially with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, endorse the message that dialogue and non-violence is a laudable path to follow to bring about change. Fear and even refusal to meet with Tibetan leaders sends the opposite signal to those around the world who stand before the choice of whether to pursue their objectives through dialogue and democratic means or through the use of violence. European and other government leaders who wish to stand for non-violent conflict resolution and against the use of deadly force should be mindful of how they demonstrate their convictions and, in the case of Tibet, they should follow the example set by successive U.S. Presidents, Secretaries of State and congressional leaders and stand by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and with the Tibetan people.

Turning to Chinese policies on Tibet, I note with concern the recent article by a person of standing within the Chinese Communist Party advocating the scrapping of the Chinese constitutional provisions and laws on autonomy as they apply to the Tibetans and other nationality minorities within the PRC.^[6] This should not be read as an expression of an over-zealous individual's view. Since some years, a certain academician with strong ties to the Communist Party leadership dealing with the Tibetan issue has also been advocating this view in various forums.^[7] It is important to understand the consequences of the implementation of such ideas, for they are considerable.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama's proposals and the position of the Tibetan exile administration, supported by many international experts and governments alike, is that the situation in Tibet should be resolved by transforming what is now merely a nominal autonomy for Tibetans under the Chinese constitution and laws into a genuine and effective autonomy. We are convinced that our primary goal of restoring the right of Tibetans to live as Tibetans according to our culture, values and religious traditions can best be achieved if Tibetans can govern themselves under a system of devolution of power from the central government to the Tibet Autonomous Region and its contiguous Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties in the People's Republic of China (where half of all Tibetans live). The international community is increasingly aware of the benefits of decentralization of power and the contribution of autonomy arrangements in the resolution and prevention of conflicts, especially in multi-ethnic states. The autonomy Tibetans are asking for, as set out in detail in the Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People that my delegation presented to the Chinese government in our 8th round of dialogue in November 2008,^[8] respects the Chinese constitutional framework and is in line with the best practice of states in the area of autonomy.

Instead of supporting the implementation of real autonomy in Tibetan areas within the People's Republic of China, the proposal I am referring to advocates the opposite position. In the name of promoting Chinese nationalism it calls for eliminating ethnicity and minority status for Tibetans coupled with assimilationist policies, such as requiring that Tibetan children study Chinese culture as the aspirational culture. The policy being advocated is one that negates the distinctiveness of Tibetans and other non-Chinese and would hasten the serious cultural destruction already underway in Tibet.

The recently-concluded session of the Chinese National People's Congress did not take up these suggestions, but these ideas are dangerous all the same. If these ideas were to lead to changes in the autonomy laws, such a development would have serious ramifications internationally, in Tibet, and for prospects of achieving a negotiated solution to the Tibet question – because it is on the basis on a genuinely autonomous Tibet that His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been able to build a consensus among Tibetans for a future of coexistence with the Chinese.

The international ramifications should be carefully weighed by any Chinese leader contemplating this radical policy move. It is necessary to consider that the recognition by certain governments of China's claim to Tibet was conditioned through various diplomatic exchanges on the understanding that Tibet's distinctive identity would be respected as an autonomous area within the People's

Republic of China. Perhaps most important in this regard was India's demand and China's explicit assurance, given by Prime Minister Chou Enlai to Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1956.^[9]

Given India's proximity to Tibet and its long relations with that country and with China, the Indian government's position and the assurances given to it by the People's Republic of China are particularly important because these factors clearly affected the actions and positions of other states whose governments have continued, as has the Government of India, to emphasize the autonomy of Tibet while recognizing it to be a part of the People's Republic of China. Joint communiqués between India and China make the important distinction when dealing with Tibet of referring to the autonomous status of the Tibetan region. A revocation of Tibet's autonomy by China or a further dilution of its meaning cannot be taken lightly by these governments and could have serious consequences for China and the region.

What China's leaders must also realize is that by reneging on the promises of autonomy in the constitution – even if they are unfulfilled – would severely impact the Tibetan position on the question. His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Middle Way approach is premised on the supposition that a middle ground between independence and the current centralist dictatorship is possible within the framework of the People's Republic of China and its constitution. That middle ground is genuine autonomy. If the constitutional basis for autonomy were to be removed from the Chinese constitution and if, therefore, a Middle Way approach could no longer be accommodated within the People's Republic of China and its constitution, then Tibetans would be compelled to look for a totally different approach.

When we look at the volatile situation in Tibet today, we could well be witnessing a preview of what is yet to come if Tibetans there do not soon experience a considerable, tangible and meaningful change in China's policies and practices or are at least given a realistic expectation for such change. The terrible and tragic wave of self-immolations in eastern and northeastern Tibet – the Tibetan areas of Kham and Amdo – are unquestionably the direct result of Tibetans living under daily circumstances of oppression. The Chinese government's failure to grasp the reality of this situation and to act responsibly is of serious concern to many governments.

Prospects for deepening religious repression in Tibet, continuing vituperative attacks against His Holiness the Dalai Lama, constraints on culture, including in the area of Tibetan language use, escalating tensions between Tibetans and Chinese as a result of economic disparities, the yet unknown impact of China's radical social experiment with nomad settlement – all of these developments forecast an intensification and broadening of the protest movement in Tibet.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has always called on the people to refrain from using violence and has courageously reached out to China's leaders over the years. The willful disregard of Chinese leaders to his proposals – and to the plight of the Tibetan people – has placed at risk the peace and stability of Tibet. I do not expect Tibetans to turn to violence as long as His Holiness is present as the symbol of the Tibetan nation and its spirit. However, a continuation of the current level of repression in Tibet – or a worsening of it, which some observers expect—will increase Tibetan resistance, as people feel they have little left to lose.

In circumstances of intense government repression against its own citizens – or of open conflict – the international community has coalesced around the Responsibility to Protect or R2P principle.^[10] This principle has been invoked in UN debates on Darfur, Burma, Libya and elsewhere, and the UN has established a framework for its implementation, including the role of early warning. The exercise of sovereignty is a privilege and responsibility that is derived from the will of the people, and it prohibits their abuse. In the case of mass atrocities, the international community has a responsibility to intervene to assist the people and protect them from intolerable harm. Intervention need not be military in nature: that is clearly a measure of last resort.

China, with Russia, has used its veto in the Security Council to block a UN Resolution on Syria that

would have embraced R2P as a justification of intervention, claiming the Security Council had no role in the internal affairs of a state. But the People's Republic of China is not immune to the will of the people it governs or to the condemnation of the international community when it violates international norms of behavior. And Tibetans will inevitably continue to appeal to the international community, despite the major obstacles they may encounter in that endeavor. They have no choice but to do so in the face of the Chinese government's refusal to address their real and legitimate grievances. The risk factors are in place in Tibet. Unless China's leaders change their course, with a more responsible approach, I believe that the international community must be increasingly vigilant and prepared to act in a qualitatively different manner to help save Tibet.

Thank you.

[1] Statement of Kalon Tripa Dr. Lobsang Sangay on the 53rd Anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising Day, March 11, 2012. Available at: <http://tibet.net/2012/03/11/statement-of-kashag-on-53rd-tibetan-national-uprising-day/>

[2] International Commission of Jurists, "Tibet: Human Rights and the Rule of Law," (Geneva, December 1997) pp. 355-358.

[3] Joint Statement Following Discussions with Leaders of the People's Republic of China (commonly known as the Shanghai Communique), Shanghai, February 27, 1972. Available at: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203>.

[4] Public Law 96-8, "Taiwan Relations Act," April 10, 1979. Available at: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.uscongress/legislation.96hr2479>

[5] Public Law 107-228, "Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Year 2003." Sections 611-621, January 23, 2002. Available at: <http://www.savetibet.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/hres1646.pdf>.

[6] Zhu Weiqun, "Some thoughts on the current nationality issue," Study Times, February 13, 2012. Available at: http://www.studytimes.com.cn/9999/empaper/xxsb/html/2012/02/13/01/01_51.htm

[7] Ma Rong, "A New Perspective in Guiding Ethnic Relations in the 21st Century: 'De-politicization' of Ethnicity in China," Asian Ethnicity 8(3): 199-217 (2007).

[8] "Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People," November 16, 2008. Available at: <http://tibet.net/important-issues/sino-tibetan-dialogue/memorandum-on-genuine-autonomy-for-the-tibetan-people/>

[9] Tsering Shakya, The Dragon in the Land of Snows (Penguin Compass, 2000), pp.276-277. Also: Robert S. Ross and Alastair Iain Johnston, eds., "New Direction in the Study of China's Foreign Policy," (Stanford University Press: 1st edition, May 22, 2006), p. 98.

[10] Gareth Evans and Mohamed Sahnoun, "The Responsibility to Protect," Foreign Affairs, November/December 2002. Available at: <http://www.crf.org/international-law/responsibility-protect/p5229>