

The Sino-Tibetan Dialogue

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IN SEPTEMBER 2002, THE ENVOYS OF THE DALAI LAMA arrived in Beijing to take part in what has become the most serious round of Sino-Tibetan talks since the early 1990s. The dialogue has been conducted on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by officials (principally ministers and vice ministers) of the United Front Work Department, which serves as a gatekeeper to other offices of the CCP and government. The latest 7th round of dialogue took place on July 2 in Beijing and was characterized by Lodi Gyaltzen Gyari, Special Envoy of the Dalai Lama, as one of the most difficult and disappointing discussions so far (see: <http://savetibet.org/news/newsitem.php?id=1333>).

Since conceding Tibetan independence in the late 1980s, the Dalai Lama has sought to achieve genuine autonomy for Tibetans within the People's Republic of China. Central to the Tibetan position is the political right of autonomy provided to all Tibetans living in contiguous Tibetan areas, an area roughly defined by the geography of the Tibetan plateau, governed by a single administrative unit under a single unified policy. According to the Chinese government's own analysis of its law on regional ethnic autonomy, the Tibetan people are entitled to the full political right of autonomy: full decision-making power in economic and social development undertakings; freedom to inherit and develop traditional culture and to practice religious belief; freedom to administer, protect and be the first to utilize natural resources; and freedom to independently develop educational and cultural undertakings.

The Tibet Autonomous Region was set up by the Chinese government in 1964. Surrounding areas on the Tibetan plateau, now incorporated into Chinese provinces, have also been designated by the government as Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties. However, Tibetan autonomy as provided for in the Chinese Constitution and laws has failed to deliver genuine autonomy to Tibetans.

Regarding a solution for Tibet reached through dialogue, the Dalai Lama says: "I firmly believe that this is of mutual benefit both to the Tibetans and the Chinese. We Tibetans will be able to develop Tibet with China's assistance, while at the same time preserving our own unique culture, spirituality,



Envoys to the Dalai Lama, Lodi Gyari (left center) and Kelsang Gyaltzen (left) meet with Chinese Party officials Du Qinglin (right center) and Zhu Weiqun (right). Photo: Central Tibetan Administration

and delicate environment. By amicably resolving the Tibetan issue, China will be able to contribute to her own unity and stability."

Support for meaningful, substantive dialogue between the two sides has come not only externally from governments and heads of state, but increasingly from within China. Public awareness of the Sino-Tibetan dialogue, although limited, created a new space for discussion of Tibet. One document circulating among Chinese Party officials stated, "Anyone who thinks the Tibet issue should be dragged on until after the death of the 14th Dalai Lama is naive, unwise, and [supporting] the wrong policy." A provocative essay by Beijing-based Wang Lixiong was entitled "The Dalai Lama is the Key to the Tibet Problem." (See: Sino-Tibetan Dialogue in the Post-Mao era: Lessons and Prospects by Tashi Rabgey and Tseten Wangchuk Sharlho, www.eastwestcenter.org <<http://www.eastwestcenter.org>> .)

However, in reaction to the Spring 2008 protests in Tibet, Beijing began to stir up Chinese nationalist sentiments against the Dalai Lama. Lodi Gyari has responded that Chinese officials "realizing that their allegations against His Holiness for instigating the recent events in Tibet and in

sabotaging the Olympics Games have become untenable, they are now urging His Holiness not to *support* violence, terrorism, and sabotaging the Olympics.” The Dalai Lama has consistently reiterated his support for the Beijing Olympics and is acknowledged internationally as one of the world’s greatest men of peace.

At considerable risk, 29 Chinese intellectuals and writers responded to the Tibetan protests with an open letter to the Chinese government that appeared in March on several Chinese language websites entitled “Twelve Suggestions for Dealing with the Tibetan Situation.” The letter urges the government to “stop the violent suppression” in Tibet and appeals to the Tibetan people not to engage in violent activities. It also urges the Chinese government to end the propaganda and news blockade, saying: “The one-sided propaganda of the official Chinese media is having the effect of stirring up inter-ethnic animosity and aggravating an already tense

situation. This is extremely detrimental to the long-term goal of safeguarding national unity.” The letter also condemns the hostile rhetoric used by government spokespeople to describe the Dalai Lama as not “in keeping with the situation, nor is it beneficial to the Chinese government’s image. As the Chinese government is committed to integrating into the international community, we maintain that it should display a style of governing that conforms to the standards of modern civilization.” (An English translation is published at <http://www.savetibet.org/news/newsitem.php?id=1245> <<http://www.savetibet.org/news/newsitem.php?id=1245>> .) More than 200 Chinese signed the petition.

A next round of dialogue has been agreed to by the Tibetans and Chinese for late October 2008.