

The Dalai Lama's Dilemma

Melvyn C. Goldstein

THE TIBET QUESTION

THE CONFLICT over the political status of Tibet vis-à-vis China has reached a critical juncture in its long history. The exiled Dalai Lama finds himself standing on the sidelines unable to impede or reverse changes in his country that he deplors, and the frustration engendered by this impotence has seriously heightened the danger of violence.

As a classic nationalistic dispute, the Tibet question pits the right of a people, Tibetans, to self-determination and independence against the right of a multiethnic state, the People's Republic of China, to maintain what it sees as its historical territorial integrity. Such disputes are difficult to resolve because there is no clear international consensus about the respective rights of nationalities and states. The U.N. Charter, for example, states that the purpose of the world body is to ensure friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination, but it also states that nothing contained in the charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters that are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state. The ambiguity about when entities have the right to seek self-determination has made international opinion an important dimension of such disputes, and the struggle to control representations of history and current events is often as intense as the struggle to control territory. In the case of Tibet, both sides have selectively patched bits and pieces of the historical record together to support

MELVYN C. GOLDSTEIN is John Reynolds Harkness Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Center for Research on Tibet at Case Western Reserve University. His most recent book is *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama*, from which this essay is adapted.

their viewpoints. The ensuing avalanche of charges and counter-charges is difficult to assess, even for specialists.

ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT

SINO-TIBETAN relations can be traced back almost 1,500 years, but the contemporary conflict is rooted in the chaotic religious and political disputes of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. During this period Tibet became a protectorate of Manchu-ruled China, although Tibet maintained its own language, officials, legal system, and army, and paid no taxes to China. China's loose control over Tibet weakened during the nineteenth century as China itself encountered more and more external and internal assaults, and by the turn of the century its protectorate was largely symbolic.

The overthrow in 1912 of the Qing Dynasty gave Tibetans the opportunity to expel all Chinese troops and officials. From then until 1951, Tibet functioned as a de facto independent nation, conducting all governmental functions without interference from China or any other country. Nevertheless, its international status remained unsettled. China continued to claim Tibet as part of its territory, and Western countries, including Britain and the United States, validated that viewpoint by refusing to recognize Tibetan independence.

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 quickly ended Tibet's de facto independence. The communists, like the previous Chinese government of Chiang Kai-shek, claimed Tibet as part of China, but unlike that government they had the military power to impose their views. Nevertheless, China wanted more than the simple conquest of Tibet—it sought to secure the formal agreement of the Dalai Lama and his government to reunification. Tibet, however, refused, and China invaded Tibet's eastern province in October 1950 to force the Tibetan government to negotiate. After Tibet's army was quickly vanquished, the Chinese forces stopped their advance and again called for talks. When neither the Western democracies, neighboring India, nor the United Nations responded positively to Tibet's pleas for help, the Dalai Lama sent a negotiating team to Beijing. It reluctantly signed the 17-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet in May of 1951. This agreement granted Tibetan recognition of Chinese



BLACK STAR

What is up his sleeve?: the Dalai Lama, 1989

sovereignty over Tibet for the first time in history. It also recognized the right of the Dalai Lama's government to continue to administer Tibet, at least until the Tibetan people and leaders wanted reforms.

The 17-Point Agreement, however, proved difficult to implement, and after an eight-year period of coexistence, there was an uprising in Tibet. Despite CIA assistance, it was quickly quelled, and the Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959, followed by about 80,000 Tibetans. China

then abolished feudalism and serfdom and instituted communes in agricultural and pastoral areas. The vast monastic system was also dismantled, and during the Cultural Revolution, all religious activities were prohibited.

POST-MAO CONCILIATION

DENG XIAOPING's rise to power in 1978 produced a new initiative to resolve the Tibet question. Deng invited the Dalai Lama to send fact-finding delegations to Tibet and said that apart from the question of total independence all other issues could be discussed and settled. The Dalai Lama responded by sending three fact-finding delegations to Tibet in 1979-80, but contrary to what the Chinese had expected, these visits revealed impoverished conditions and strong feelings of Tibetan nationalism that bolstered the confidence of the exiles at a difficult time in their history.

Beijing's external strategy of trying to persuade the Dalai Lama to return was paralleled by a new internal conciliatory policy in Tibet. It had two main components. The first was an ethnic dimension—making the Tibet Autonomous Region (formally inaugurated in 1965) more Tibetan in overall character by fostering a revitalization of Tibetan culture and religion including reopening Buddhist monasteries, allowing recruitment of new monks, permitting more extensive use of written Tibetan, and replacing large numbers of Chinese cadre with Tibetans. Second was an economic dimension—rapidly improving the standard of living of individual Tibetans by temporarily eliminating taxes and below-market-price sales quotas and developing infrastructure to allow Tibet to grow.

While all this was taking place, the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama held secret talks in Beijing, once in 1982 and again in 1984. However, these proved fruitless. The exiles were unwilling to accept a solution that did not allow Tibet to operate internally under a political system different from the rest of China, that is, under a Western-style democracy, and notwithstanding Deng's earlier comment, the Chinese were categorically unwilling to consider permitting any entity other than the Communist Party to run Tibet. Complicating matters was the exiles' demand for the creation of a Greater Tibet that

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would include not only the territory that had been political Tibet in modern times, but also ethnic Tibetan areas in western China, most of which Tibet had lost in the eighteenth century.

THE INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN

THE DALAI Lama responded to the collapse of these negotiations by launching an international campaign in 1987 to secure increased political support and leverage in the United States and Europe. A key element in this new strategy was that the Dalai Lama for the first time traveled to the West as a political leader (previous visits had been as a religious leader). In speeches in the United States in 1987 and at Strasbourg in 1988, he argued that Tibet was illegally occupied by China and asserted that a Greater Tibet should become a self-governing democratic entity under a constitution that granted Western-style democratic rights. This enlarged political Tibet would have the right to decide on all affairs relating to Tibet and Tibetans. China would remain responsible for Tibet's foreign policy, although Tibet would maintain and develop relations through its own Foreign Affairs Office in nonpolitical fields like commerce, sports, and education. Although the proposal did not seek independence, it far exceeded the limited autonomy that could be observed within the Chinese political system, and it had already been rejected by China in the 1984 talks.

While the Dalai Lama was still in the United States in 1987, monks in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, demonstrated in support of his efforts there and in opposition to China's presence in Tibet. After the police made arrests of the protesting monks, a full-scale riot ensued in Lhasa. Although Beijing initially blamed the demonstration solely on the Dalai Lama, it soon moderated its rhetoric in an attempt to salvage its internal conciliation policy in Tibet. In a surprising turnaround, Beijing openly criticized the excessively "leftist" activities of its cadre in Tibet, publicly admitting that one cause of the riot was the failure of its own officials to implement the reform program correctly. Nevertheless, the months after the Lhasa riot saw more demonstrations by monks and nuns and a steady stream of antigovernment posters.

In the United States, more support for the Dalai Lama emerged when Congress added a "sense of the Congress" amendment to the

Foreign Relations Authorization Act that was signed into law in December 1987. It stated that the United States should make the treatment of the Tibetan people an important factor in its relations with China, that China should respect internationally recognized human rights and end violations against Tibetans, and that the United States should urge China to release all political prisoners in Tibet and reciprocate the Dalai Lama's efforts to establish a constructive dialogue on Tibet's future.

Many Tibetans in Lhasa took the Dalai Lama's warm welcome and acts such as this legislation as evidence that America was now committed to helping the Dalai Lama against China. Not surprisingly, there were more monk-led protests in 1988, two of which led to serious riots. A fresh initiative to rekindle talks by inviting the Dalai Lama to visit China to participate in a religious ceremony in 1989 failed when the Tibetan exile leadership persuaded the Dalai Lama to decline because events were going well in their view. In retrospect, they lost a major opportunity to open a new dialogue. The situation in Tibet, meanwhile, unraveled further when a fourth riot broke out in Lhasa on March 5, 1989. At this juncture, Beijing decided Tibet was out of control and declared martial law.

THE HARD LINE AND THE OPEN DOOR

By 1989, therefore, Beijing's internal and external strategies for Tibet were in shambles. Unless China was willing to relinquish direct control in Tibet and accept the dominion status outlined in the Dalai Lama's 1998 Strasbourg speech, the exiles appeared bent on continuing their international campaign. The campaign was likely to encourage more demonstrations in Tibet and new accusations internationally. The Dalai Lama's international initiative had turned the tables on China, placing Beijing on the defensive both internationally and within Tibet.

In Beijing, it was hard for moderates to refute the contention that China had to stop coddling Tibetans before matters got completely out of hand. Many officials had always believed that liberalizing policy on religion and monasticism in Tibet would only increase nationalist and separatist sentiment, and their view now prevailed. Beijing's new hard-line policy developed more effective

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security measures and began limiting further religious and cultural liberalization. At the same time, it accelerated a program of rapid economic development.

One of the most important components of Beijing's rapid economic development strategy in Tibet was opening the door to the rest of China. That policy has resulted in a much-resented influx into Tibet of non-Tibetan Chinese entrepreneurs and laborers eager to get a share of the massive funds being poured into Tibet, and fostered a much closer economic integration of Tibet with the rest of China. And while these non-Tibetans are not colonists in the normal sense of the term, since their official place of residence is not Tibet and they are expected eventually to return home, at any given time their numbers are unprecedented. At least half of the several hundred thousand residents of Lhasa now appear to be non-Tibetan.

For well over a thousand years of recorded history, through wars, conquest, and external domination, Tibet remained the exclusive home of a people. Now Tibetans in Tibet and in exile see this condition being lost and are unable to stop it. Beijing has, in a sense, turned the tables back on the Dalai Lama, and the triumphs of the Dalai Lama's international campaign look more and more like Pyrrhic victories. The international initiative won significant symbolic gains for the exiles in the West and spurred Tibetans in Tibet to demonstrate their support for the Dalai Lama, but it did not compel China to yield and played a major role in precipitating the new hard-line policy that is changing the nature of Tibet.

Beijing now has little interest in discussions with the Dalai Lama. It feels he is not serious about making the kind of political compromises they could agree to and resents his supporters' anti-Chinese rhetoric and activities. Moreover, China believes that its policy of rapidly modernizing Tibet will solidify its position there regardless of what the Dalai Lama or nationalistic Tibetans think or do. Beijing's hope is that ultimately a new generation of Tibetans will emerge that will be less influenced by religion and that will consider Tibet being part of China to be in their interest. Moreover, even if such an orien-

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tation does not develop, the new policy will so radically change the demographic composition of Tibet and the nature of its economy that Beijing's control over Tibet will not be weakened. Beijing's integrationist policy is working well, their trust of the Dalai Lama is at an all-time low, and the absence of a credible U.S.-Europe-Japan threat of sanctions allows them to refuse talks with impunity.

THE DALAI LAMA'S OPTIONS

THE DALAI Lama and his top officials, contending that Tibetan culture, religion, and language are endangered, are anxious to stop the influx of non-Tibetans into Tibet. The Dalai Lama is encouraging supporters in the West to urge Beijing to resume talks and has recently written President Jiang Zemin expressing a wish to make a religious visit to a Buddhist shrine in China, presumably to initiate a new round of discussions. China, however, has not agreed to a visit by the Dalai Lama, even one disguised as a religious pilgrimage. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since Beijing asked the Dalai Lama to visit Beijing on a religious mission in 1989. Beijing does not believe that a new round of talks would be fruitful since the Dalai Lama continues to insist on his Strasbourg proposal's real political autonomy for Tibet and shows no sign of ceasing his attacks on China.

Nevertheless, not only is achieving a permanent solution in Tibet clearly in China's national interest, but the solidification of power by Jiang Zemin means there is now a leader in Beijing with the authority and stature to change direction on this issue. Many Chinese experts and moderates question whether the current policy will produce the long-term stability that China wants in Tibet because it is exacerbating the alienation of Tibetans, even young ones, intensifying their feelings of ethnic hatred and political hopelessness, and inculcating the idea that Tibetans' nationalistic aspirations cannot be met so long as Tibet is part of the People's Republic of China. Right now the hard-liners in China dominate, and they will continue to do so unless something intervenes to give more moderate elements new leverage. That something will have to be provided by the Dalai Lama. Calling off the pro-Tibet demonstrations in the United States during Jiang's recent visit there would have been the kind of signal that is needed.

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Thus the question facing the Dalai Lama and his circle of leaders is similar to the one they confronted in 1982 when their first delegation went to Beijing—how much less than Tibetan independence are they willing to accept? What is new, however, is the tremendous pressure China's hard-line policy is exerting on the Dalai Lama either to resolve the conflict quickly or to develop effective countermeasures that will prevent China from changing the ethnic and economic character of Tibet.

The Dalai Lama has several options. He can continue his current international campaign, keeping China on the defensive in the international arena while trying to persuade Washington and Europe to use their power to pressure China for concessions, all the while hoping that the flow of history will provide the victory he desires—that is, that communist China will soon disintegrate like the Qing Dynasty in 1912 and the Soviet Union more recently. Such a policy would generate sympathy and funds for Tibetan exiles in the West and make Tibetans and their supporters feel good. However, Tibet is being transformed in a manner the Dalai Lama and his followers abhor, and if that continues for any length of time, the transformation will likely be difficult to reverse. Consequently there is enormous pressure on the Dalai Lama to move in one of two directions.

The first is serious compromise—sending Beijing a clear and dramatic message that he is willing to accept less than political autonomy and cease attacking China internationally. Such a step, however, will be excruciatingly difficult since it will likely split the fragile unity of the exile community and discourage supporters and donors in the West. If such an initiative ultimately failed, the Dalai Lama could find himself left with political and financial chaos. Given his deep distrust of China and the lack of external guarantees, this option will be difficult for the Dalai Lama to choose.

An alternative direction is escalation—encouraging (or even organizing) violent opposition in Tibet as a means of exerting new leverage on China. Throughout the 1980s both sides have adjusted tactics to counter their opponent's initiatives, and a campaign of terrorist violence would be consistent with this pattern in that it would prevent China

The Dalai Lama may not be able to prevent militant Tibetans from resorting to violence.

from pursuing business as usual in Tibet. Such a strategy would not seek to drive China out of Tibet but rather to pressure Beijing to adopt a more conciliatory line. If such a strategy was successful, it could help destabilize China, but even if only partially successful, it could curtail tourism, impede the growth of overseas investment, threaten the security of all non-Tibetans, and heighten international awareness of the seriousness of the problem. It would, in essence, seek to demonstrate to China the futility of the hard-line policy by showing that the ethnic sensibilities of Tibetans cannot be discounted. Even if China again resorted to martial law in Tibet, Tibetan militants could easily respond by shifting their attention to targets in neighboring provinces.

This option would also be extremely difficult for the Dalai Lama to sanction given his commitment to nonviolence, but it may be difficult for him to prevent, even if he personally opposed it. His own failure to force China to moderate its policies when the character of Tibet is so obviously being altered could lead more militant Tibetans to declare his civil disobedience approach a failure and turn to more violent approaches on their own. The crux of the matter is that Tibetans are unlikely to sit by for much longer watching Beijing transform their homeland with impunity. Nationalistic sentiment combined with desperation and anger make a powerful brew, and there are Tibetans, inside and outside Tibet, who favor a campaign of focused violence. There were three bombings in Lhasa in 1996, the last a large blast that damaged a government office building and neighboring hotels and shook buildings half a mile away.

AMERICA AND TIBET

TIBET REMAINED an obscure topic in U.S. foreign policy until the 1980s, when the Dalai Lama's international initiative began to garner strong popular sympathy as well as congressional support. Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993 initially appeared to extend this momentum to the White House. As part of his policy of giving high priority to human rights issues in foreign affairs, President Clinton openly criticized China's actions in Tibet. When he announced on May 28, 1993, that the secretary of state would not recommend most favored nation trade status for China unless Beijing made significant progress on a series of

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human rights problems, he listed "protecting Tibet's distinctive religious and cultural heritage" as one of these areas. The United States for the first time appeared willing to use its muscle to try to force changes in Chinese policy toward Tibet. If MFN was denied China in part because of its policies in Tibet, Tibetan exiles would have attained precisely the kind of leverage they had been seeking. However, that did not come to pass. The United States' China policy shifted radically in 1994 when President Clinton announced he would not use economic sanctions to try to induce political changes in China, let alone Tibet. Tibetan exiles were thrust back to square one. It was a painful lesson.

U.S. China policy has once again placed political and economic interests ahead of human rights and democracy, carefully steering away from a public, confrontational style. In the 1994 State Department report on Tibet, Washington unambiguously reassured China that the United States accepts Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. The report stated that since at least 1966, U.S. policy has explicitly recognized the Tibet Autonomous Region as part of the People's Republic of China, and that this policy is consistent with the view of the international community, including all of China's neighbors. It also stated that because the United States does not recognize Tibet as an independent state, it does not have diplomatic relations with the self-styled Tibetan government-in-exile.

The dominant viewpoint in the U.S. foreign policy establishment is that the United States has no strategic interest in Tibet and should do nothing more than deplore human rights violations and privately suggest that Beijing open new talks with the Dalai Lama. The problem with this policy is that it is implicitly premised on the Sino-Tibetan relationship remaining as it now stands. However, if the conflict degenerates into serious bloodshed, U.S. national interests would be severely harmed. China would respond to violence in Tibet in a heavy-handed way that would create powerful domestic pressures in the United States to support the Tibetans. In turn, Beijing would perceive any such steps as a threat to its core strategic interests, and that would worsen the already fragile relations between China and the United States, potentially complicating the United States' entire Asia policy.

The United States, therefore, has a major strategic interest in Tibet—that of preventing the conflict from turning violent. The current U.S. policy, however, is not moving to bring about a peaceful resolution of the

conflict, nor can it prevent the exiles or Tibetans in Tibet from turning violent. In fact, if we take into account the vocal support of Congress and others, the sum total of American involvement may actually be encouraging Tibet to reject compromise and oppose China. Of course, it can be argued that the Tibetans will not be able to organize and sustain a program of targeted violence against China, but it seems shortsighted for the United States to allow the situation to deteriorate to a state where that hypothesis will be tested. A more prudent strategy would commit the United States to facilitate a speedy resolution of the conflict. Such a policy would not only meet strategic concerns in America's Asia policy but would also fulfill core American humanitarian values on cultural survival and religious freedom.

ANATOMY OF A COMPROMISE

THE KEY to resolving the dispute is crafting a compromise that will ensure the preservation of a Tibetan homeland where ethnic Tibetans predominate and Tibetan language, culture, and religion flourish. Such a compromise is possible within the current political structure of China if both sides agree to a number of important concessions and work to set aside past hatred and distrust.

In the political sphere, the Tibet Autonomous Region would retain its current political system, but Beijing would move in stages to appoint reform-minded Tibetans to head all its party and government offices. After 10 years, the percentage of Tibetan officials would increase substantially from its current 60 to 70 percent to as high as 85 to 90 percent.

In the cultural sphere, a variety of measures would have to be implemented to enhance the degree to which Tibetan culture predominates. One of the most critical of these would be to shift the bilingual emphasis from Chinese to Tibetan and restore written Tibetan as the main language of the government of Tibet. A detailed plan for this reform was drawn up by a committee of Tibetan and Chinese reformers in 1987 and could readily be enacted. Other cultural measures such as eliminating restrictions on the number of monks in monasteries could be worked out by the parties and gradually phased in.

In the critical demographic and economic spheres, Beijing would have to take measures that would decrease substantially the number

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of non-Tibetans living in Tibet and reduce outside economic competition so that Tibetans become the main beneficiaries of economic development in the Tibet Autonomous Region. The current program of economic development would continue, but if need be at a slower rate and with prime consideration being given to the direct welfare of Tibetans. Since the overwhelming majority of non-Tibetans in Tibet are not legal residents, Beijing has no responsibility for their resettlement and reemployment and could accomplish this shift in priorities, although not without difficulty.

The end result of such a process would be a Tibet that was predominantly Tibetan in culture, language, and demographic composition. It would continue to modernize but would be run by Tibetans, albeit communist Tibetans. This kind of Tibet would probably meet with the approval of the overwhelming majority of Tibetans in Tibet if they felt external support for something more was not forthcoming. If China in time follows the path of Taiwan and evolves more democratic institutions such as multiple political parties, the political leadership in Tibet would similarly broaden its base. Transforming Tibet into a modern society is perfectly compatible with preserving its rich language, culture, and religion. It is in the interests of both sides to facilitate the preservation of such a Tibet as the homeland of a people.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks to achieving such a solution is the exiles' demand for the re-creation of a Greater Tibet. Such a formation would be extremely difficult for Beijing to accept, but could be handled by implementing parallel reforms in the ethnic Tibetan areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region and by waiting to address the unification issue until the new program has been in operation for five or ten years—that is, until new relations of trust and respect are established. Beijing, however, with considerable justification, now considers that even an “ethnic” solution to the Tibet question would be a potential threat to its position given the strong anti-Chinese and separatist feelings of Tibetans. Consequently, to receive favorable consideration in China, a compromise

For Tibet to remain a homeland, the Dalai Lama must give up on political autonomy.

plan would have to include components that clearly enhanced Beijing's sovereignty and control over Tibet.

Only the Dalai Lama can make such moves for Beijing, so he, rather than the exile government, is the key element in validating such a compromise. To win the above concessions from China, the Dalai Lama would have to return to China and Tibet, publicly accept Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, and work actively to create cooperative and harmonious relations between Tibetans and non-Tibetans. In particular, he would have to end international attacks on China and persuade Tibetans in Lhasa to stop disturbances—in essence to accept that a truly Tibetan Tibet is not incompatible with being part of China. He would have to use his enormous prestige and charisma to change the attitude of Tibetans toward being part of China. Once begun, it should be possible for such a process to be implemented over the course of a decade, even if most Tibetans in exile do not return. For China, this acceptance would resolve the Tibet issue since support for Tibetan independence in the West would end if the Dalai Lama accepted such a solution. For the Dalai Lama, it would preserve Tibet as a distinct homeland for his people and culture.

However, this kind of compromise is unlikely to occur without external assistance. There is no consensus in the exile community about the advantages of such a political compromise, let alone about the exclusion of the ethnic Tibetan areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region, so the Dalai Lama would very likely have to decide to pursue this course without the unified support of his government-in-exile. It would not be an easy decision, and his tendency will be to resist compromise. Consequently, if China and the Dalai Lama are left to their own devices, a negotiated resolution of the conflict along the above lines is unlikely. There simply is too little trust and too many powerful reasons for not taking a risk.

If progress is to be made, therefore, a catalyst or facilitator is needed, and that is how the United States could play a constructive role, either through direct private diplomacy or through a proxy country. Given the deep distrust, the Dalai Lama would need strong reassurances from the United States that should China renege on its commitments once he returned to China, the United States would take strong action to protect him. On the other hand, the United

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States would certainly also want to assure Beijing privately that it will support the new arrangement vociferously regardless of what hard-line critics in Congress or elsewhere in the West may say. Moving in that direction would entail some risk for the United States given China's extreme sensitivity to intervention in its internal affairs and because congressional critics might well accuse the administration of selling out the Dalai Lama to the communists. But if done discreetly, and with the agreement of the Dalai Lama, these risks would be minimal. The death of Deng Xiaoping, the solidification of the position of Jiang Zemin, and the appointment of a special coordinator for Tibetan affairs in the United States offers an unusual concatenation for moving in this direction.

The Dalai Lama will be central to any compromise. At 63, he must be thinking about how best to preserve his people and their way of life in his remaining years. He may decide to continue to stand on the sidelines, hoping that external forces will destroy his enemy, but it is more likely that he will soon feel compelled to adopt an active approach, moving to preserve Tibet either by accepting a major compromise, or more likely by tacitly and reluctantly accepting a new tactic of countering Chinese policies in Tibet through organized violence. It seems clearly in the interests of the United States and Tibetans to develop a strategy that will ensure that he and his leaders choose the former over the latter. ②