



'Middle-Way' or Muddled Way: The Dalai Lama at 50 Years in Exile by Sourabh Gupta

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Fifty years after a perilous escape over the Himalayas, the third instance of flight by a Dalai Lama in the 20th century from his seat in Lhasa, His Holiness appears no closer to returning – or being allowed to return – to his homeland. Thirty years after resuming contact with the Chinese Communist Party and unveiling his “Middle-Way Approach” to resolve the Tibetan question, the gap between the Dalai Lama and Beijing remains as wide as ever. A rewarding expression of support recently for Tibetans’ unique identity and human rights by President Obama notwithstanding, His Holiness’ strategy of bringing to bear the full rhetorical weight of the Western world to wring political concessions from Beijing continues to show little results. As Tibet reverts to a more settled phase following a series of sensitive anniversary dates or events, a more persuasive approach by the Dalai Lama is imperative.

Foremost in this regard is the need for His Holiness to negotiate purposefully with the leadership in Beijing, to match rhetoric with action as he goes about securing an enhanced autonomy arrangement for the Tibetan people. Notwithstanding repeated denials of seeking separation or independence for more than a decade, it was not until October 2008 that the Dalai Lama’s government-in-exile formally came around to reconciling Tibet to being “a part of the multinational state of the PRC.” That the commitment was itself preceded just two days earlier by Britain’s recognition of Beijing full sovereignty over Tibet – setting aside its century-long anachronism of China’s suzerain position in Tibet – also suggests a measure of external coordination, if not orchestration. Further, His Holiness’ Middle-Way Approach still continues, officially at least, to levitate between the semantics of independence and autonomy.

Second, the Dalai Lama needs to eliminate the gap between his stated desire for compromise and the fundamentally variant demands presented by his negotiators to Beijing. Even as His Holiness has professed a willingness to accept the socialist system in Tibet under Chinese Communist Party rule, the recently unveiled *Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People* contains no such explicit indication or reference. To the contrary, its expansive interpretation of genuine autonomy includes the right to create not only its own regional government but also “government institutions and processes” suited to the needs of the Tibetan people.

This is not to discount the series of nuanced retractions that the Dalai Lama’s Middle-Way Approach has undergone. A Tibetan demand that their homeland be offered a political relationship as expansive as China’s offer in the early-1980s to Taipei was ratcheted down to an insistence on a Hong Kong-style “association” relationship with Beijing. Since the early 2000s and the latest phase of Sino-Tibetan negotiations, hints about a residual international personality have been kept to a minimum. Further, the autonomy arrangement sought is an amalgam of the Hong Kong “one country, two systems” formula and the existing autonomy provisions of the PRC Constitution. Yet, at a level of basic principles, the on-going failure to pay obeisance – even on a token basis – to the prevailing Chinese political (and constitutional) system reflects poor judgment at the Tibetan end. Subsequent clarification that the *Memorandum* “does not challenge the socialist system of the PRC” is hardly likely to strike Beijing as an endorsement of Chinese Communist Party’s supremacy.

Learning Nothing, Forgetting Nothing

The fundamental imperative remains His Holiness’ need to break free of the shackles of his own political irresolution and – *as head of state of the Tibetan government-in-exile* – translate his spiritual authority into decisive political leadership. An illustrative case in point is his support for the notion of a “Greater Tibet” as a single administrative entity. Conceived in the mid-1960s as a unifying basis for non-communist national consciousness among émigré groups of diverse ethnic stock, the concept lacks historical basis. Even during Tibet’s existence as a *de facto* independent state through much of the first half of the 20th century, its rough-and-ready frontiers bore no resemblance to the Greater Tibet chimera. Rather, the zone of administrative control – partly derived from British-brokered truces – loosely approximated that of the present-day Tibet Autonomous Region.

More problematically, it was disturbances originating amongst East Tibetan tribes-people in Greater Tibet which – in cascading onward to Tibet Proper and Lhasa – triggered the revolt of 1959. Yet rather than immunize his administrative realm against these extra-provincial passions, the Dalai Lama chose to embrace the movement – precipitating his exile and thereby extinguishing the unique experiment in self-rule in which both he and Chairman Mao were equally vested. Akin to his choice, then, of refusing to confront Greater Tibetan sentiment, His Holiness continues today to privilege the cohesion of his émigré community and its call for an expansive Greater Tibet, even at the expense of being branded as insincere by Beijing. Ironically then, even as the broad thrust of the autonomy demands of the Middle Way Approach bear resemblance to the self-rule provisions of the (much-maligned) Seventeen Point Agreement of 1951, the lessons that precipitated the latter’s demise remain unlearned.

On each of these three fronts – sovereignty, the socialist system, and territoriality-related questions – Beijing is likely to brook no compromise. Further, with the devolution of autonomy in China’s restive peripheries intimately associated with considerations of power relations, the supremacy of the socialist system, and of the party, will have to be explicitly recognized. While the internationalization of the Tibetan cause can lend useful political cover to this process, the flamboyant inauguration of sensitive negotiating offers on Capitol Hill, in Strasbourg, or in its entirety on the internet also needs to be frankly reassessed. In any case, internationalization *per se* of the Tibetan struggle is not to blame. Rather, it is the Dalai Lama’s inability to use internationalization as a springboard for hard-headed intra-Tibetan political bargaining as well as purposeful negotiating vis-à-vis the Chinese.

As Beijing ups-the-ante yet again by issuing regulations that purport to manage the reincarnation of living lamas, including the successor of the 14th Dalai Lama, there is not a moment to lose. At China’s 12th National People’s Congress in 2013, the Beijing-proclaimed Panchen Lama – unbeknownst to and remote from much of his flock – is expected to be elevated to the post of vice chairman of that body, given that he will have attained the minimum age requirement. That the revered institution of the Dalai Lama, down the line, be spared a similarly sad spectacle of schism necessitates that His Holiness fully internalize and act upon the fundamental premise that the road to greater autonomy runs through Beijing, not the West.