

### What Is the Fuss about Tibet?

On March 14, anti-Chinese riots erupted in Lhasa, Tibet. Chinese security forces suppressed crowds with teargas and bullets in what has become the most violent confrontation there in two decades. The Tibetan government-in-exile claimed Chinese forces killed over 100 people, while Beijing claims only 19 have died. Tibet's exiled leader, the Dalai Lama, urged his followers and the Chinese to refrain from violence while the Chinese government blamed him directly for fomenting the unrest. On March 24, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called for direct talks between Chinese leaders and the Dalai Lama as the only solution to the current impasse.

The Dalai Lama's international campaign against China has pushed Beijing to modernize Tibet, resulting in an influx of non-Tibetans seeking economic opportunity. If the Dalai Lama wants to preserve Tibet as a homeland, he must either acquiesce to violence by militants or compromise. He will resist either course, so the United States should facilitate negotiations. Full autonomy is out, but the Dalai Lama can obtain a greater emphasis on the Tibetan language and a larger number of positions for Tibetans in the administration.

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

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 occupied Tibet.

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