

# ***The Nuances of the US-Tibet Relationship***

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The modern history of Tibet has taken place almost entirely in the context of the Cold War. After the Communist Chinese takeover of the region in 1949 and 1950, the United States covertly sponsored various forms of Tibetan anti-Chinese resistance to further their opposition to the Communist regime. In contrast, after the Sino-US rapprochement in 1972, Tibet's utility as an American foreign policy tool rapidly dissipated. However, the typical scholarly assessment of this policy shift is too one-dimensional: it sees the shift as a US move to categorically improve Chinese relations as much as possible and cut all important Tibetan ties in furtherance of this goal. In reality, US policy was not so monolithic or univocal, and Tibet itself possessed more agency in these events than is usually attributed to it. Both US policy and the circumstances surrounding US-Tibetan relations were multifaceted and often divided. In this paper, I intend to argue that this fractured nature of US-Tibet relations allowed Washington flexibility to avoid total rapprochement with China and maintain Tibet as a potential political tool in Sino-US and other international relations.

At first glance it seems a bold, almost revisionist claim to challenge the status quo on the Nixon administration's policy toward China. However, it is not my intention to suggest that Washington did not seek rapprochement with China. After examining various internal communications within the Executive Branch of the US government, and to some extent Congressional publications, I find that much Tibet scholarship overemphasizes the China side of the equation and neglects the nuances of Washington's relations with Tibet. The United States

has enjoyed a complex relationship with Tibet during their short diplomatic acquaintance. Despite the common appellation of Tibetans as “orphans of the Cold War” (McGranahan 112), various factors, both those the US determined and those over which it had no control, converged to create a dynamic and every-changing relationship between Washington and the Tibetans. I have written this paper in order to warn against and correct the tendency to oversimplify the US’s Tibet policy and its place in Sino-American relations.

In order to demonstrate this point, I will first give a brief history of Tibet in the twentieth century, focusing on the era between World War II and the Sino-American rapprochement. I will then examine the various factors that led to a flexible and multifaceted US policy toward Tibet and China. I divide these factors into two broad categories: *internal factors*, or those existing within nations and groups; and *external factors*, or those existing between nations and groups. This is admittedly a somewhat artificial categorization – some factors will not fit neatly into the “internal” or the “external” column – but I believe it is useful in organizing the various influences on US foreign policy, and I will address the anomalies individually below. Because my focus is on America’s Tibet policy, I will concentrate my discussion on internal factors specific to the US government and external factors specific to the US-Tibet relationship. As I discuss each factor, I will also examine its implications for later US Tibet policy. Given my lack of primary sources from Tibet itself and my inability to interpret them should I acquire them, I will rely more heavily on secondary material when discussing external factors. However, all discussions of such factors will still be grounded in US Government documents in order to maintain their relevance to American policy.

Tibet’s history in the past one hundred or so years has been fraught with confusion and conflict over its international political status. For the first half of the twentieth century, Tibet

enjoyed *de facto* independence. Despite Chinese claims to sovereignty over Tibet, in 1914 Tibetans “secured British recognition of their autonomy” (Richardson 116). They also succeeded in maintaining a “military and diplomatic defense against encroachments of the Chinese” (Smith, *TN* 226). These two factors combined allowed Tibet to essentially conduct its own affairs until 1949. Even the US, which became involved in the region only in the 1940s, recognized Tibetan autonomy, though it stopped short of full diplomatic recognition of Tibet as an independent nation (Smith, *TN* 260-261). However, in 1950, shortly after the Communists under Mao Zedong took power in China, “the PLA [People’s Liberation Army] began its invasion [of Tibet]” (Smith, *CT* 19), and later that year Tibetan representatives were “coerced into signing the Seventeen-Point Agreement” (Smith, *CT* 20), which absorbed Tibet into China and placed it under Chinese rule.

From this point onward, Washington took advantage of its positive relations with Tibet and the Dalai Lama to use Tibet as a weapon against Communist China. Beginning in the 1950s, the US started “covert support for a Tibetan guerrilla force...[and] also provided funds and other forms of non-military support for the Dalai Lama” (Goldstein 150). In addition, “the United States...took the lead in arousing support for Tibet at the UN” (Smith, *CT* 215), though only on a human rights basis, never raising the issue of Tibetan sovereignty. The US continued its support of Tibet until the normalization of Sino-American relations in 1972. This move spelled doom for Tibet: “US diplomatic recognition of the PRC necessarily implied recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet” (Smith, *TN* 555). The US could no longer sponsor Tibetan resistance against Chinese rule now that it acknowledged the legitimacy of Chinese sovereignty in Tibet. In 1974 “the U.S...completed its retreat by cutting off the subsidy that it had been covertly paying the Dalai Lama to maintain himself and his government.... The Tibetans regarded this as

the final breach of the commitment made to them [by the US]” (Knaus 310). Consequently, “for more than a decade after [this period]...Tibet remained an obscure issue in U.S. foreign policy” (Goldstein 153), and Washington would never again match the level of commitment it had displayed to Tibet in the ‘50s and ‘60s.

However, this account of enthusiastic normalization of relations with China and a summary termination of support for Tibet is not the whole story. There are indications in various sources that, despite the dramatic change in America’s China policy, Washington remained open to the possibility that full normalization with China could not or would not occur. This attitude is due to both considerations of the US national interest and external factors that made such normalization more difficult. First, I will consider factors internal to the American situation that influenced Washington’s policy.

From the beginning of the US’s support of Tibetan resistance activities, Washington adopted a multifaceted policy that would allow it to adapt its policy to changing situations in Tibet. In a 1971 CIA report on the status of its Tibet project, the agency mentions that “in addition to guerrilla support [their project includes] a program of political, propaganda, and intelligence operation” (Memorandum Prepared for the 40 Committee). The expressed intent of these activities is “to impair the international influence of Communist China by supporting the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exiles in maintaining the concept of an autonomous Tibet” (Memorandum Prepared for the 40 Committee). This simple description of the project highlights two important assumptions underlying the Tibet activities. The first is that various sorts of activities – “propaganda, intelligence,” etc. – were necessary to attack China’s international reputation. A comprehensive approach was necessary to cover the breadth of such a task. Nowhere, however, are these various branches of the Tibet activities described as mutually

dependent. In fact, a similar CIA report a year later “proposes to continue the subsidy to the Dalai Lama...and fund intelligence opportunities” but cut support for the propaganda and political elements of the project (Green). Washington therefore did in fact take advantage of the flexibility in its multiple-approach policy, modifying its support to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans without fully dropping it as relations with China changed. The CIA plan built in flexibility for future US policy.

The second assumption underscores the conduits through which US Tibet policy was channeled: “guerrilla support” and “the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exiles.” Despite the fact that the goal of the entirety of the Tibet project was the attack of China’s international image, the US maintained two distinct routes through which to accomplish this. As McGranahan points out, the “resistance force was organized in ways that reflected...eastern Tibet rather than the...hierarchies of central Tibet” (McGranahan 116), i.e., the region associated with the Dalai Lama and his authority. He also indicates that Washington’s primary contact with the Dalai Lama, his brother Gyalo Thondup, “was more of a patron than a leader of the resistance” (McGranahan 117). The general picture that emerges is that there were significant differences in US interactions with the Dalai Lama and his government in exile on the one hand and Tibet’s guerrilla resistance forces on the other. These structural differences were significant enough to allow the US to treat each conduit more or less independently. Indeed, the 1972 CIA report indicates “a plan for the gradual phasing out of the [guerrilla] force...leav[ing] a program which supports the Dalai Lama’s efforts to preserve Tibetan cultural, ethnic, and religious identity, but without...aggressive propaganda activities or political action” (Green). Again, this allowed the US to modify their Tibet policy during the Chinese rapprochement without totally shunning Tibet.

At this point, though, two questions arise: (1) Why was flexibility in Washington's Tibet policy necessary if all they intended to do was scale down the project (which is the case so far in my analysis) – i.e., why not avoid taking the pains to build in flexibility and simply cut the program when it was no longer necessary; and (2) why, as this insistence on maintaining ties with Tibet suggests, did Washington not seek total rapprochement with China? It seems there is a common explanation to these questions. Despite the usual story that improved relations with China were in the American national interest, Executive Branch sources indicate that Nixon and Kissinger believed this only to a limited extent. Fully improving relations with China carried some risks that US policy had to account for, and Tibet occupied a delicate position in Washington's relations with Asia that the US government could not completely disregard. I discuss the evidence for this conclusion, however, in examining the other internal and external factors below.

The other significant American internal factor in a flexible US policy was the structural divisions in the US government. Different organizations within the government had varying attitudes toward Tibet, and the differential expression of these various organizations' powers led to a diverse Tibet policy that was not locked into one track alone. One such internal division existed between the State department and the Nixon-Kissinger team. A 1970 memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon illustrates this point well, where Kissinger informs the president, "State opposes the visit [of the Dalai Lama to the US]...[because] it would generate support for...the Tibetan cause" (Kissinger). He goes on to suggest, on the contrary, that they "keep the prospect of a private visit open...[as] we may yet have reasons to want good working relations with the Dalai Lama and his entourage" (Kissinger). Thus, while the State Department's attitude was more salient during the process of rapprochement with China, pragmatists like Nixon and

Kissinger maintained an undercurrent of possible future relations with Tibet. Coming from Kissinger, though, this Dalai Lama comment is surprising. It would seem that any continued support of Tibet would be detrimental to Washington's goals with China, as Kissinger and Nixon are both known for their belief that improving relations with China would carry a net benefit for the United States. It is tempting, though, to exaggerate the degree to which Nixon and Kissinger believed this should be carried out. Following a pragmatic political philosophy, they were unlikely to carry any policy to its logical extreme. Indeed, Kissinger warns in this memorandum of not getting carried away by "our present euphoria concerning Sino/U.S. relations" (Kissinger). It seems, therefore, consistent that he would advise against total Sino-US rapprochement if pragmatic considerations rendered it disadvantageous.

Of course, the question arises of what these "reasons to want good working relations with the Dalai Lama" are. If the Tibet issue is nothing more than a thorn in China's side, why would the Nixon administration continue supporting the Dalai Lama in any form while seeking to improve Sino-American relations? We may glean a possible answer from a 1970 communication between the American Embassy in India and the State Department. Again discussing the subject of the Dalai Lama's request to visit the US, the embassy believes that "a total rejection of even a private visit at this juncture would be interpreted...[as] evidence that Washington has really gone soft on the Chicom issue to the point of 'appeasing' Peking" (Keating). They do not express this opinion, however, simply out of consideration for the Tibetans: "As suggested by FonSec [Foreign Secretary] T.N. Kaul's remarks during last year's Indo-US bilaterals, there are those in the GOI [Government of India] who are increasingly prone to ask where shifting US position on China leaves India" (Keating). Tibet's utility to US foreign policy, then, was not restricted to Sino-US relations. At the very least, Washington's stance

toward Tibet had implications for its relations with India, if not other powers in Southern Asia as well. This vindicates Kissinger's belief in reasons to want good relations with the Dalai Lama. China was obviously not the only nation on America's foreign policy radar, and it was necessary that America limit the Sino-US rapprochement in order to balance relations with other nations in the region and the world.

The other important structural division in the US government exists between Congress and the executive branch. As a factor in determining US policy, however, this division does not fit neatly into the internal/external classification. Despite its location in the internal structure in the US government, its relevance derives from these branches' respective interactions with the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans, which concerns external factors more than internal. As such, for the time being it is sufficient to say that, despite genuine Congressional support for the Tibetan campaign for autonomy some time after the rapprochement, "US Congressional resolutions in support of Tibet were not matched by similar support by the executive branch of the US government" (Smith *TN* 601). I will further explore the roots and consequences of this structural division below.

This overlap between internal and external factors also highlights an important point: US policy cannot be understood from internal factors alone, but must also be examined in light of external factors, i.e., the interactions and relations between the US and Tibet. The dynamics of this relationship were equally important in shaping US policy, especially the form it would take after the Sino-American rapprochement. Often such external factors made their impact outside of Washington's control, or even its awareness.

One such factor was the role miscommunications between the United States and the Tibetans themselves, particularly the guerrilla resistance force trained and led by the CIA. This

force conceived of its role differently than did the CIA, and apparently this difference in understanding was never recognized or resolved on either side. The CIA used the Tibetan guerrillas primarily for gathering intelligence. The 1971 CIA status report makes no reference to the Tibetan force as a military project, but it is littered with remarks such as, “For intelligence collection on the Chinese presence in Tibet we have worked independently with Tibetan leaders. Our independent operations with Tibetans have concentrated on attempts to place resident agents in Tibet” (Memorandum Prepared for the 40 Committee). However, McGranahan points out that “Tibetans themselves viewed their activities as part of a military battle” (McGranahan 125). That is, they were fighting for “the restoration of Tibet to the rule of the Dalai Lama and the opportunity to return to their homes—this is, for life to return to ‘normal’” (McGranahan 121-122). The Tibetans believed they struggled for a noble and important goal, not that they were peripheral actors serving US interests in the larger game of the Cold War. Thanks to this miscommunication, the CIA was able to take advantage of the Tibetans’ enthusiasm to accomplish major intelligence goals, such as the recovery of documents detailing the internal state of China in the 1950s (McGranahan 119-122).

While McGranahan argues that these miscommunications and misunderstandings hampered US efforts in Tibet, I would like to suggest that they had unintended positive consequences for American policy. McGranahan characterizes the Tibetan resistance force as a “grass-roots organization” (McGranahan 118) that, “[e]ven after the CIA’s role ended...continued for another five years” (McGranahan 121). Additionally, the “American instructors are remembered fondly by the Tibetans themselves” (McGranahan 114). The CIA’s relationship with the Tibetan resistance, then, cultivated an enduring anti-Chinese force with friendly inclination toward the United States. Although Washington did not know it at the time,

dropping its military support of Tibet did not quite have the consequences it is usually thought to have. While the geopolitical situation did not change, China was still left with a nuisance in the form of an enduring Tibetan resistance and a people largely sympathetic to the United States. Favorable ties existed between Tibetans the US government (albeit dormant ones), ties with the potential to be reactivated in the context of later relations.

This establishment of friendly ties extended in both directions. Indeed, the other important external factor shaping US Tibet policy was the efforts of Tibet and the Dalai Lama to engage the United States in support of their own goals. McGranahan mentions that “Tibetans were not just acted on; they were actors in Cold War struggles” (McGranahan 128). Tibetans are often denied agency in their relations with the US, but in reality their actions had significant effects on American foreign policy. At the time of, and probably because of, the Sino-US rapprochement, the Dalai Lama began to formulate a new international approach, the so-called “Middle Way Approach,” which sought autonomy within, rather than independence from, China. Smith notes that “the Middle Way policy dated from 1974. Presumably, this had something to do with the 1973 American rapprochement with China” (Smith, *CT* 215). It seems the Dalai Lama was successful in securing some support in the US Congress. In a document appended to the 1988-1989 Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Congress expresses the belief that in 1950, “the Chinese Communist army invaded and occupied Tibet,” and further that the Tibetans “had always considered themselves as independent” (United States Foreign Relations Authorization Act). Also published the following year was a Congressional document expressing support for the Dalai Lama’s Five-Point Plan for Tibet, which sought Tibetan autonomy (United States Congress S. Con. Res. 129). Thus, more than a decade after Washington ostensibly dropped Tibet, the Dalai Lama has found American support once more. While these particular

expressions of solidarity with the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans did not carry much weight in terms of concrete US policy, they did demonstrate the continued existence of friendly connections between branches of the US Government and the Dalai and a willingness to express more concrete support for his efforts under more favorable conditions.

And this point finally ties back to the Congress/State Department structural divisions mentioned earlier in the paper. During the rapprochement process in the early '70s, the State Department expressed its disinclination to continued support of the Dalai Lama. There was Kissinger's mention of the department's opposition to the Dalai Lama's visit, cited above, but this generally unfriendly attitude toward the Dalai Lama and Tibet also finds expression in other sources, such as a communication to the American embassy in India that "reaffirm[s] decision that we do not wish to have Dalai Lama come to U.S. this year" (Rogers). This policy continued more or less unchanged through the end of the twentieth century; Smith cites several State Department statements to support the idea of "the firm policy of...the US Government to recognize China's sovereignty over Tibet" (Smith, *TN* 623). There thus existed a significant division between Congress's and the State Department's attitudes toward Tibet. While the State Department's stance may currently be more important as the muscle behind the US's Tibet policy, Congressional support has no doubt been instrumental in the "remarkable upgrading of the Dalai Lama's international receptions" (Smith, *CT* 266) in recent times.

Thus, the general picture that emerges of US-Tibetan relations is that, despite a significant scale-down in support for Tibet after the Sino-US rapprochement (the original scale of which has never yet been matched), a combination of the Dalai Lama's activism and bonds of goodwill existing between the US and Tibetans have in combination led to a mild reactivation of US support for the Dalai Lama and Tibet. This shift does not constitute full-blown endorsement

of the Dalai Lama's push for Tibetan autonomy, which seems too close to a challenge to China's sovereignty in the region. However, the change is significant enough to be worth noting, and it raises the question of why the US would revisit support for the Dalai and Tibet in the first place. While there may be no easy responses to this question, I believe the answer ties back to the pragmatism practiced by Nixon and Kissinger. Tibet occupies a delicate and unique relationship in the international world and in relations between the United States and China. While Tibet itself is not a particularly strong international power, it is not insignificant in pragmatic calculations of America's national interest and the connections between that interest and relations with China. When the US sought to normalize relations with China, this did not signify that the two nations were suddenly to agree on all international issues and become perfect allies. As Kissinger suggested as he admonished Nixon not to be carried away by their "euphoria concerning Sino/U.S. relations" (Kissinger), there may always be unforeseen reasons for supporting Tibet, whether in the realm of Sino-US relations, Indo-US relations, or some other context altogether. Washington's complex, evolving, and recently revived engagement with Tibet suggests that policy-makers have not lost sight of this attitude. As long as tensions exist between America and China, Tibet will likely continue to play some role in US policy, though only the contingencies of history will be able to say what that role will be.

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