The Waiting Game: Will changing Tibetan Buddhist politics change foreign policy surrounding Tibet?

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Key Terms
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The Simla Accords
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Jasmine Spring
Tibetan National Uprising Day

CASE

With the election of Lobsang Sangay as Prime Minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile in 2011, the 14th Dalai Lama gave up his position as political head of the exiled people. The transfer of political power—the Dalai Lama remains the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people—was the last step in the Dalai Lama’s plan to make the government-in-exile fully democratic, which he says is more in line with the belief system of Buddhism. Meanwhile, over 138 Buddhist monks and nuns in Tibet have committed self-immolation between 2009 and 2015 by setting themselves on fire, in protest of China’s treatment of Tibetans. 1

Sangay traveled to Washington, D.C. and toured Europe in November 2011. In Washington, he asked the United States and international community to pressure China to improve its treatment of the Tibetan people in a speech to the Congressional Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. While he met with members of Congress, he did not meet with any representatives of the State Department. A few months after President Barack Obama privately met with Dalai Lama in the Map Room of the White House.

China, meanwhile, refuses to acknowledge the completely democratic government-in-exile as a negotiating party in the conflict over governance of Tibet, the vast region in the southwest portion of the country. China uses threats to prevent other countries from addressing human rights abuses in Tibet, preferring to wait until the Dalai Lama dies so that it can appoint a Dalai Lama who is favorable to the
Communist Party. China has also engaged in a number of programs meant to bring Tibetan Buddhism under state control, including close monitoring of activities in monasteries and funding of pro-Chinese re-education sessions aimed at Tibetan religious groups.

China draws on the nationalism and economic power of its 1.5 billion citizens to threaten against international intervention into the Tibet issue. At the same time, the Tibetan government-in-exile’s new democracy is a threat to the Communist Party’s appeal to the Chinese people. Pro-democracy movements around the world complicated China’s policy of non-intervention as concern about domestic pushes for democracy competed with economic interests. Meanwhile, in the midst of pro-democracy revolutions in North Africa and Arab states, the established democracies of the world have to choose whether they will recognize the democratic Tibetan government-in-exile or continue to allow the perpetration of human rights violations by the Authoritarian regime.

**Tibet and China - History**

China’s People Liberation Army “invaded” or “liberated” Tibet in 1950, depending on one’s perspective. The Communist government saw itself as freeing Tibet from Anglo-American imperialism. The Seventeen-Point Agreement signed by Chinese and Tibetan representatives on May 23, 1951 says that Tibet has a “long history within the boundaries of China.” The Tibetan government-in-exile argues that the country has been independent for 2,000 years. “The country came under a degree of foreign influence only for short periods of time in the 13th and the 18th centuries,” according to the history offered by the Office of Tibet, New York.

Tibet traces its history to the establishment of the Yarlung Dynasty in 127 B.C., but says it became a modern country under King Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century. A key argument for its independence is in an 821/823 treaty between China and Tibet that demarcated borders and read, “Tibetans shall be happy in Tibet and Chinese shall be happy in China.”

Later Tibetan pacts with the Mongul (1279-1368) and Manchu (1644-1911) empires of China did not constitute a break in the country’s sovereignty, it says. Between the two, the Ming Dynasty had little relations with Tibet, but China argues the Ming inherited sovereignty over Tibet from the Monguls. Chinese rulers have had influence in Tibet for centuries. The Office of Tibet admits that China sent imperial troops to Tibet four times from 1720 to 1792 to protect the region from invasion or internal unrest.

In the early 20th century, Tibet had relationships with neighboring states, even if its international relations were not robust. The 13th Dalai Lama (1876-1933) fled to China and Mongolia when the British invaded in 1904, then to India when the Manchu invaded in 1910, but he returned to declare Tibet’s independence after the fall of the Manchus in 1911. Britain and Tibet agreed to borders between India and
Tibet in the Simla accords of 1914, which recognized China’s suzerainty over Tibet, defined as “a dominant state controlling the foreign relations of a vassal state but allowing it sovereign authority in its internal affairs.”

Britain’s Foreign Minister David Miliband called Simla accords an “anachronism” and “suzerainty” an outdated term when he announced in 2008 Britain recognized China’s sovereignty over Tibet. Miliband said the announcement was merely a clarification of Britain’s position on Tibet, but NGOs that support the Tibetan cause said the move was a drastic change that undercut the Dalai Lama’s negotiations for political autonomy. Britain gave away “the entire legal and political foundation for these talks,” according to Robbie Barnett, a historian of Tibet at Columbia University.

Tibet and China - Future

The 14th Dalai Lama pushes for “The Middle Way” (based on the Buddhist concept of balance and equanimity), a solution that would keep Tibet as part of China while remaining autonomous in its internal affairs. After he fled from Tibet to India in 1959, he released a statement saying that China had violated the Seventeen-Point Agreement and that because the agreement was signed under duress it was invalid. Until 1979, the Dalai Lama supported Tibetan independence, but behind the scenes he negotiated with other Tibetan leaders to gain support for a more moderate path.

Even while affirming Tibet’s historical independence in a speech to the U.S. Congressional Human Rights Caucus on September 21, 1987, the Dalai Lama outlined his Five Point Peace Plan:

1. Transformation of the whole of Tibet into a zone of peace;
2. Abandonment of China’s population transfer policy, which threatens the very existence of the Tibetans as a people;
3. Respect for the Tibetan people’s fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms;
4. Restoration and protection of Tibet’s natural environment and the abandonment of China’s use of Tibet for the production of nuclear weapons and dumping of nuclear waste;
5. Commencement of earnest negotiations on the future status of Tibet and of relations between the Tibetan and Chinese people.

These points reflect the crucial concerns of Tibet and its supporters, who argue that China’s interest in Tibet is in its natural resources. Tibet sits on 2.5 million square kilometers (just less than 1 million square miles) of land, with an average altitude of 13,000 feet above sea level. (China’s definition of Tibet as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), however, is less than half of historic Tibet.) Tibet is valuable to China as a source of land, water, and minerals, including uranium. There are 6 million Tibetans, and while numbers of Han Chinese migrants in Tibet aren’t kept, the Office of Tibet in New York reports that Han Chinese now outnumber Tibetans. The Office of Tibet also says that under Chinese rule, 1.2 million Tibetans have been killed,
many have been imprisoned, and more than 6,000 monasteries, temples, and other buildings have been destroyed.  

China painted a vastly different picture of Tibet in a 1992 document. Outlining the basis of Tibetan/Chinese unity since 618, the document says the Democratic Reform of 1959, economic development, the reestablishment of religious freedom after the Cultural Revolution, and other factors have improved Tibetans’ quality of life as a part of China.

The Five-Point Peace Plan and Tibetan autonomy, according to China, is a guise for Tibetan independence. “[It is because the Dalai Lama sticks to his position of ‘Tibetan independence’ and continues his efforts to split the motherland that contacts between the Central Government and the representatives of the Dalai Lama have yielded no results],” it says.

Negotiations between Chinese and Tibetan representatives ceased completely between 1993 and 2002 and the nine meetings from 2002 to 2010 have resulted in no real progress.

Who is the Dalai Lama?

According to Tibetan Buddhism, Tenzin Gyatzo, the current Dalai Lama, is the 14th reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of universal compassion. A bodhisattva is an enlightened being, but rather than achieve Nirvana and escape the cycle of rebirth (samsara), the Dalai Lama chooses out of compassion to return to the Tibetan people to teach and lead them. Tibet institutionalized formal reincarnation lineages to preserve authority in religious and eventually political settings instead of blood lineage because of the large numbers of celibate monastics.

The Dalai Lama and democracy

Other lineages of lamas have been and continue to be important spiritual and political leaders for Tibet, but the institution of the Dalai Lama, which started with Gendun Drubpa (1391-1474), is the most important today. The institution remained apolitical until the fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682), who took political responsibility for all of Tibet.

China paints Tibetan political rule under the institution of the Dalai Lama as autocratic in the 1992 document on Tibet:

Before the Democratic Reform of 1959, Tibet had long been a society of feudal serfdom under the despotic religious-political rule of lamas and nobles; a society which was darker and more cruel than the European serfdom of the Middle Ages. Under the centuries-long feudal serfdom, the Tibetan serfs were politically oppressed, economically exploited, and
frequently persecuted. Old Tibet can be said to have been one of the world’s regions witnessing the most serious violations of human rights.\textsuperscript{12}

Scholar and Tibetan Buddhist Robert Thurman offers a different view of the institution then and today in \textit{Why the Dalai Lama Matters}:

The monastic ruler as a Buddhist monk holds solemn vows of gentleness, poverty, chastity, and honest, among other essential virtues. Hence he is dedicated to principles of nonviolence, support of individual freedom and education, and selfless service. The Tibetan people preferred a monk king to a warlord king with his armies, coercive demand for labor service, and self-aggrandizing ambitions for his dynastic progeny. This new Tibetan society was unique then and is still now, and, therefore, terms like feudal, theocratic, even traditional or pre-modern, are not accurate in describing it.\textsuperscript{13}

The current Dalai Lama, the first to have significant contact with the outside world, has embraced modernity and secular democracy for Tibet. “In a way, he’s acknowledging that the way Tibet was in the past...was somewhat exploitative and not in line with what needs to happen in modern times,” says Varun Soni, dean of religious life at University of Southern California.\textsuperscript{14} The Central Tibetan Authority manages the community of 140,000 Tibetans living in exile. In 1960 he started the Assembly of Tibetan People’s Deputies, which became the Parliament-in-Exile in 2006.\textsuperscript{15} Under the draft constitution released in 1963, the Dalai Lama retained ultimate authority “in deference to the wishes of the people,” but the Dalai Lama wrote in the 1992 “Guidelines for Future Tibet’s Polity and the Basic Features of its Constitution” that he was never satisfied with this clause.\textsuperscript{16}

The first directly-elected Kalon Tripa, or Prime Minister, took office in 2001. With the election of Lobsang Sangay as Kalon Tripa in 2011, the Dalai Lama announced that he would only be the spiritual and not the temporal leader of the Tibetan people, emphasizing that only he could end the Dalai Lama’s dual authority. The Dalai Lama explained in a 1993 speech that his belief that democracy is the best form of governance for Tibet is rooted in Buddhism:

Modern democracy is based on the principle that all human beings are essentially equal, that each of us has an equal right to life, liberty, and happiness. Buddhism too recognizes that human beings are entitled to dignity, that all members of the human family have an equal and inalienable right to liberty, not just in terms of political freedom, but also at the fundamental level of freedom from fear and want. ... No system of government is perfect, but democracy is closest to our essential human nature.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{The Dalai Lama’s future}

By turning the Tibetan government-in-exile into a democracy, the institution of the Dalai Lama may no longer be useful to the Tibetan people. The Dalai Lama, now 76 years old, released a statement in September 2011 saying that around age 90, he
would consult with the Tibetan people, lamas, and others to determine whether to
the institution should continue, or in other words, whether he should reincarnate.

As a bodhisattva or enlightened being, the Dalai Lama can decide the conditions of
his rebirth or emanation (manifestation in another body before death, which would
allow him to appoint a successor) or he can also decide not to be reborn, if he does
not feel that his continued existence would be useful to his people.

His uncertainty in the Dalai Lama’s continued usefulness rests in China’s desire to
control Tibetan religious leadership. The Dalai and Panchen lamas traditionally
find each other’s reincarnation. After the current Dalai Lama announced he had
found the 11th Panchen Lama in 1995, the 5-year-old boy, Gedhun Choekyi, was
kidnapped and hasn’t been heard from since. Chinese officials appointed another
boy, Gyaltsen Norbu, Panchen Lama six month later. He has spent most of his youth
in Beijing.18

The government hopes to gain legitimacy for the “Chinese Panchen Lama” among
the Tibetan people, in order to gain legitimacy for a government-appointed Dalai
Lama. In 2007, the State Administration for Religious Affairs announced regulations
requiring Tibetan Lamas to submit a “reincarnation application” to obtain prior
governmental approval.19 The Chinese Communist Party says it has the sole
authority to select the next Dalai Lama.

Religion was rejected during Mao’s Cultural Revolution, but since then religious
freedoms have increased. The Chinese Communist Party is officially atheist, and it
only recognizes five religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and
Protestantism. The State Administration for Religious Affairs, according to the
Council of Foreign Relations, “denies legal protection for groups it deems ‘subject to
foreign domination,’ as well as groups whose activities fail to classify as ‘normal.’”20

The current Dalai Lama is considered a traitor and separatist, so devotion to him is
illegal inside China. Because monks have been political dissidents—such as those in
Tibet that set themselves on fire in protest of human rights abuses—the Communist
Party restricts Tibetan religion and operates “patriotic education campaigns.” By
appointing a 15th Dalai Lama who is loyal to the Communist party, China hopes to
make the Tibetan people loyal to the state.

The Dalai Lama responded to China’s efforts in his statement on reincarnation:
It is particularly inappropriate for Chinese communists, who explicitly reject
even the idea of past and future lives, let alone the concept of reincarnate
Tulkus, to meddle in the system of reincarnation and especially the
reincarnations of the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas…. No recognition or
acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by
anyone, including those in the People's Republic of China.21

The Dalai Lama as international figure
The 14th Dalai Lama is “a whole new type of Dalai Lama,” according to Soni, who hosted the Dalai Lama at the University of Southern California in 2010. His exile has made him into a global statesman and politician; spiritual, religious, and ethical leader; icon for peace and Nobel peace prize laureate, rock star, and the face of the Tibetan people. His appeal to universal values has earned him diverse supporters. “He’s this transcendent spiritual teacher, probably the most respected spiritual person in the world, even though he’s considered public enemy No. 1 by the world’s largest country,” Soni says. “There’s something about Buddhism being a non-theistic religion that allows people to still self-identify with [their] own faith but look to Buddhism for some kind of spiritual guidance.”

His talks attract crowds in the thousands around the world. He’s earned honorary degrees and awards from states and organizations, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

Thurman, who has known the Dalai Lama since 1964, describes the Dalai Lama’s presence as “oceanic, vast, and energizing.” He has a tremendous impact on the individuals he meets—including every U.S. president since the first George Bush—and represents Tibet for them: “People who meet the Dalai Lama intuitively feel that this amazing person is a product of a unique culture—one that should not be wiped out, one worth preserving. The Tibetan people under occupation and in exile, then, could not have a more effective representation in their quest for freedom.”

As a result of his popularity on the world stage, people around the world have joined exiled Tibetans in calling for China to respond to the Dalai Lama’s attempts at negotiations and cease human rights abuses within Tibet. The Dalai Lama’s charisma has won him a number of supporters in the U.S. Congress, which often takes views at odds with the State Department by passing measure to raise the profile of the Tibetan cause. The international campaign started after a series of meetings between Tibetan and Western supporters in 1986-1987. Non-governmental organizations include Free Tibet (started in 1987) and the International Campaign for Tibet (1988), while groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International also pay close attention to human rights abuses in Tibet. Tibetans have a number of their own NGOs as well, most notably the Tibetan Youth Congress, which has 30,000 members worldwide.

Free Tibet also gained popularity as a cause because of movies such as Seven Years in Tibet and Kundun (both released in 1997), the support of celebrities such as Richard Geer, who is a Buddhist, and awareness-raising concerts by bands such as the Beastie Boys.

Appeasing China
Despite the Dalai Lama's international popularity and concerns for human rights, China has been able to exert influence on other countries because those countries want good political and economic relationship with China.

U.S. and Taiwanese intelligence services covertly assisted Tibetan rebels starting in 1956, but President Richard Nixon suspended these efforts in 1970 “as part of his bid for rapprochement with China.” The Dalai Lama could not get visas to the United States until 1979 due the Kissinger China policy, which was maintained by his successor.


Thurman, who worked on nominating the Dalai Lama for the Nobel Peace Prize, writes that the Dalai Lama was blocked as a recipient of the award for several years because of “the Norwegian Foreign Minister’s fear of provoking the Chinese, who they hoped under Deng Xiaoping were slowly trying to improve their human rights behavior and normalize their relations with other nations.” This concern dissipated after the blatant human rights violations at Tiananmen Square in 1989. The Dalai Lama was given the award the same year.

After Tiananmen Square, human rights in China, including the status of Tibetans, entered the annual debates about whether the United States should grant China “Most Favored Nation” status, which became known as normal trade relations. These debates ended in 2000 when the U.S. granted permanent normal trade relations to China.

As the world’s most populous country and the second largest economy, China’s influence on the world stage has increased in the 21st century. It no longer needs to actively seek external support. Britain’s 2008 move to recognize Chinese sovereignty over Tibet was “in return for absolutely nothing,” according to Stephanie Brigden, director of the Free Tibet Campaign. A spokeswoman for the foreign minister said China was glad about the decision, but “We did not give in to Chinese pressure. China was not pushing us on this.”

Human Rights Watch’s Phelim Kine commented the role human rights plays in China’s relationships with other countries after U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton brought human rights into 2011 talks between the two countries:

For a long time there’s been a sense that the U.S. and other key bilateral partners with China don’t have leverage with human rights but the fact is you have to put your hands on the levers in order to have leverage. And to a certain extent human rights have been taken off the table. They’ve been marginalized in the meaningless toothless human rights dialogues. And
what's necessary is that these issues come back to the main bilateral
dialogue.... The Chinese government buys a lot of U.S. treasuries... but they do
not buy silence on issues that of visceral importance both to the Chinese
people but also to U.S. consumers and... to the maintenance of a stable and
sustainable long-term relationship between our two countries.  

**Responding to human rights concerns**

The United States and other countries have not been completely silent on human
rights and Tibet. The U.S. State Department publishes annual human rights country
reports, and China’s report includes a separate section on Tibet.

The latest report points to “intensified controls” following 2008 protests that
marked the March 10 anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising. In 2010,
“authorities continued to commit serious human rights abuses, including
extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial detention, and house
arrest. The preservation and development of Tibet’s unique religious, cultural, and
linguistic heritage remained a concern.”

Restrictions have increased in 2011, according to Human Rights Watch and
Amnesty International, who together wrote an open letter to Chinese President Hu
Jintao regarding the self-immolation of 9 monks and 2 nuns between March 16 and
October 25, 2011. “These individual protests appear to be in response to
increasingly harsh punitive security measures imposed on religious institutions and
lay communities in the region,” the letter states, asking China to end the
restrictions. China blames the Dalai Lama for encouraging self-immolations. A 12th
took place in December.

The United States has called on China “to respect the rights of Tibetans; to resolve
the underlying grievances of China’s Tibetan population,” according to a
spokesperson for the State Department.

The United States recognizes Tibet as part of China, but also supports negotiations
between China and the Dalai Lama, according to a 2004 report on Tibetan
negotiations. The U.S. “does not conduct official diplomatic relations with the
Tibetan "government-in-exile" in Dharamsala,” but meets with the Dalai Lama “as an
important religious leader and Nobel laureate.”

**China elevates Tibet issue**

China sees the Dalai Lama’s meetings with international leaders as attempts to
interfere with an internal issue. Barnett, the Columbia University scholar on Tibet,
first saw Tibet referenced as a “core interest” in Chinese foreign policy in 2006, but
China particularly took a more aggressive stance against meetings after President
George Bush met with the Dalai Lama in public when he received the Congressional
Gold Medal in 2007. Barnett says the strategy worked:
Since that campaign began, the leaders of Australia, New Zealand, Germany, and the pope have refused to meet the Dalai Lama; Britain publicly renounced its recognition of Tibet as autonomous in the past; and France found itself forced to declare in writing its "opposition to support for Tibet’s independence in any form whatsoever." Last year, only two national leaders met the Dalai Lama--the prime ministers of the Czech Republic and of Denmark (the Danes later found themselves compelled [to release] a public statement "opposing Tibetan independence")--compared to 21 in the previous four years.35

President Barack Obama has met twice with the Dalai Lama, both times in private, and has reaffirmed the U.S. position that Tibet is part of China. Before Obama met with the Dalai Lama on February 18, 2010, Zhu Weiqun, a party official at vice-ministerial level, said that a U.S. meeting with the Dalai Lama "would be both irrational and harmful, [and] if a country decides to do so, we will take necessary measures to help them realize this."36 Barnett points out, however, that such threats have not been followed up with anything but rhetorical repercussions.

Such threats usually refer to cancelations of high-level or secondary high-level meetings, potential cancelations of summits, or trade being affected, Barnett says. But Barnett sees “vaguely menacing or vaguely bombastic” statements as mostly strategic, delivered to win a concession. “The Chinese government couldn’t afford to follow through very far with those kinds of repercussions,” says Barnett, who thinks most Western governments take Chinese threats over Tibet too seriously.37

Non-intervention

China’s threats against foreign government’s involvement with Tibet or the Dalai Lama is based in its policy of non-intervention—it does not want to intervene in the affairs of other states and it doesn’t want other states to intervene its affairs. “For Beijing, the gravest external threats were those that threatened to link up with internal opponents of the regime,” says John Garver, who specializes in Chinese foreign policy.38

The Chinese Communist Party’s domestic legitimacy has rested historically in overcoming the nationalist party, which was seen as “running dogs of the West,” Barnett says. “They recovered Chinese national pride from the century of humiliation that they say was caused by Western imperialists,” including Japan.39 The Communist Party, therefore, must maintain independence from former imperial powers.

Political legitimacy is one reason Tibet is important to Chinese foreign policy, according to Dibyesh Anand, a professor of international relations who studies Tibet.

Tibet matters not only because of strategic, military, nationalist and economic factors, but it also raises the question of political legitimacy. If the
Chinese state compromises, it might be interpreted as a sign of weakness and recognition that, contrary to government propaganda, all is not well in China's Tibet.\textsuperscript{40}

Chinese nationalism also means that “a future democratic China is no guarantee against a more jingoistic and less-tolerant country,” Anand says, pointing to Chinese reaction to the March 2008 protests in Tibet and around the world.\textsuperscript{41}

According to a Congressional Research Service report prepared following the protests, the demonstrations started peacefully on March 10, 2008 but spread after a government crackdown, breaking into riots by March 14. State-run television focused on the protesters' violence while international coverage focused on the government crackdown, though few international journalists were allowed into Tibet. The government blamed the “Dalai Clique” for inciting violence, despite a speech by the Dalai Lama asking Tibetans to protest within the law and reiterating his support for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.\textsuperscript{42}

Some members of the U.S. Congress urged a U.S. boycott of the 2008 Olympics or a boycott of the opening ceremonies in the light of the government crackdown in Tibet. The House of Representatives passed a resolution 413-1 that called on China to end its crackdown, enter into dialogue with the Dalai Lama, and protect Tibetan culture.\textsuperscript{43} Tibet supporters came out to the Olympic torch rally in cities around the world, to protest China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics in light of its human rights abuses.

With national pride already high due to the Olympics, Chinese were outraged by the anti-China protests in other countries. The BBC asked for responses from six Chinese people, one who reported talks of Chinese boycotts of foreign companies. “We feel some Western people and governments have a hidden agenda: They don’t want China to become a powerful country,” said Lan Wang, a professor living in Singapore.\textsuperscript{44}

When the Chinese government threatens other countries, Barnett says, they may simply warn that an action such as supporting Tibet will be “offensive to the Chinese people.” “China’s public is becoming much more important as a political force,” Barnett says. “Therefore these promised repercussions can take on a much more unpredictable dimension.”\textsuperscript{45}

The government directs this political force by controlling media. For the 50th anniversary of the Tibetan uprising in 2009, a government-backed exhibit in Beijing show how China had liberated Tibet. It attracted 3,000-4,000 visitors a day.\textsuperscript{46} There are articles demonizing the Dalai Lama every month in Chinese newspapers, according to Barnett, who adds that internal demonization forces China to demonize the Dalai Lama internationally too.

\textbf{China and democratic uprisings}
While China can mobilize its population behind nationalism, the country is not without its dissidents. When pro-democracy protesters started calling for the downfall of dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries, China responded by suppressing pro-democracy *Jasmine Spring* protests and arresting human rights lawyers and activists.

Chinese policy of non-interference also led the country to avoid getting involved in pro-democracy movements in most countries undergoing uprisings during the Arab Spring. China’s position paper for the 66th Session of the UN said they would support diplomatic or mediation efforts to promote stability:

*We adhere to the principle of non-interference in others’ internal affairs, respect and support countries in the region in independently handling their domestic affairs, and respect the wish and aspiration of the people in the region. We hope relevant parties in the countries of the region will resolve differences through political dialogue and restore stability and normal order as soon as possible. We believe the countries and people in the region have the ability and the wisdom to find a political system and development path suited to their specific conditions.*

Libya was a notable exception, as China seemed uncertain of whether to support Muammar Qaddafi or the rebels. China voted in favor of sanctions against Qaddafi in the UN Security Council, though it later abstained from a resolution authorizing “all necessary measures” to protect Libyan civilians and condemned NATO airstrikes against Qaddafi’s military. Economic interests—especially around construction and oil, according to *The Economist*—drive China’s desire to keep friendly relations with the rebels who would come into power after Qaddafi.

The pro-democracy uprisings in North Africa and the Arab world also affect China’s attitude toward the United States, according for former president of the U.S.-China Business Council Robert Kapp: “They see the United States...as somehow complicit with some of these efforts in other countries to overthrow existing authority. They feel insecure...about the role of the United States in relations to forces within China that they feel threaten the stability of the state.”

The Dalai Lama hoped that Western democracies would draw the connection between supporting democratic reform of Arab countries and supporting the newly democratic Tibetan government-in-exile. He brought the pro-democracy uprisings up in a statement on the 52nd anniversary of the *Tibetan National Uprising Day*. “These events have shown once again that determined non-violent action can indeed bring about positive change,” he said.

About a week later on March 19, 2011, the Dalai Lama said that embracing democracy would strengthen the Tibetan cause in his retirement remarks. The international community, who support the Tibetan cause, will commend the Dalai Lama’s sincerity for the complete democratization of the Tibetan
polity. It will raise our prestige in the world. On the hand other, it will fully expose the falsehood and lies of the Chinese government that there is no Tibet problem except the issue of the Dalai Lama's personal rights.51

The Arab Spring was set off by the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit vendor, Josh Rogin notes in *Foreign Policy*, “but the international community has yet to take notice” of the self-immolations in Tibet.52

**International recognition of the Kalon Tripa**

In negotiating about Tibet, China refuses to meet with anybody but the Dalai Lama’s private representatives. The exiled government and Lobsang Sangay’s election as Kalon Tripa are illegitimate, according to China. The Tibetan government-in-exile only represents the relatively small number of exiled Tibetans, not those in China, while the Dalai Lama remains Chinese Tibetans’ spiritual leader.

China’s influence on Nepal was evident in its interference in the Tibetan election, despite calls from the European Union to allow refugees in the country to vote. The votes of 13,000 Tibetan exiles were seized by Nepalese riot police.53 “We are only concerned about anti-China activities and activities against our neighbors that are also against our foreign policy,” Nepal’s government spokesperson Ganga Lal Tuladhar said.54

The fact that India, the Tibetan government-in-exile’s base and home to the largest number of Tibetan exiles, allowed the vote indicates that China’s influence on India is limited, Barnett wrote in *Foreign Policy*.55

"India could very well say we cannot tolerate this," says Tempa Tsering, the Dalai Lama’s official representative in Delhi, of the Tibetan administration acting essentially as a separate government within its borders. Tsering emphasizes that Tibetan administrators do not call their organization a "government-in-exile" as to not give the impression that it thinks of itself as an independent nation-state. As the birthplace of Buddhism, India is a natural home for Tibetans because of "the cultural, historical, ethical, religious relationship we share," Tsering added.56

When the Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru did not necessarily want to host the exiled Tibetan leader or his people because of the strain it would put on Sino-Indian relations. Because China recognized a different border between India and Chinese Tibet than India had negotiated with Tibet in 1914, India and China went to war over the border in 1962. “The Tibetan insurgency and the support it received from across the Sino-Indian border helped persuade Beijing that it was essential to establish effective control over that border,” according to Garver.57 The border region remains contested, while China is India’s largest trading partner.58
Economic interests also prevent Western democracies from recognizing the new prime minister. "A potential Tibetan uprising is not something either America or Europe considers a major priority when they are facing internal unrest resulting from their own economic decline," reads an article from the Indian news source that also was posted on the Central Tibetan Authority's website.

The 43-year-old Lobsang Sangay, who was born in exile and earned a law degree from Harvard, made his first international trip as the Kalon Tripa. He met with congressional leaders and addressed the congressional Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in Washington, and he visited seven European capitals and addressed the European Parliament's foreign affairs committee. He was not, however, granted a meeting with the U.S. State Department or the White House or its equivalent in European states.

In addition to asking countries to address human rights concerns and help the Tibetans in exile preserve their culture through financial support, Sangay had a three-part request for the international community in relation to the government-in-exile's democratization:

1. Affirm that Tibet's true representatives are the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration as recognized by the Tibetan people;
2. Support the transfer of political power to the new Kalon Tripa of Tibet and the Parliament in Exile of the Central Tibetan Administration;
3. Commend the Tibetan exile community on their successful development and implementation of democratic self-governance.

"It is worth the effort to consider how the world's oldest continuous democracy can deepen its engagement with the democratic Tibetan government," he said in his speech to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

In order to do so, however, the United States would need "a new protocol of unofficial contacts with the Tibetan movement, even as the U.S. continues to recognize the Chinese government's sovereignty over Tibet." Wrote Ellen Bork, director of democracy and human rights at the Foreign Policy Initiative advocating for a model based on the United States’ informal diplomacy with Taiwan.

**Consequences of recognizing Tibetan government-in-exile**

If China were to recognize that the Dalai Lama is no longer the political leader of the Tibetan government-in-exile, it might be "easier for Beijing to approach him with less loss of face," Barnett wrote in *Foreign Policy*. At the same time, foreign governments cannot have diplomatic relations with Sangay. "If you don’t recognize a government, your hands are tied," Barnett says.

Eliot Abrams, a senior fellow for Middle East Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, suggested that the U.S. government receiving Sangay and denouncing Chinese repression is “an experiment well worth trying,” considering the opposite
strategy has only seen China’s treatment of Tibetans worsen. The strategy would also “associate our country with the cause of human rights,” says Abrams, who met with Tibetan representatives informally as the assistant secretary of state for human rights during the Reagan Administration.54

Bork argues that support for Tibet is not just moral, but strategic, promoting regional stability. She refers to scholar Dan Twinning’s 2009 argument in *Foreign Policy* that China and India could go to war over Tibet. The border between China and India is China’s only unresolved border, and China appears “to inflame the issue as a source of leverage over New Delhi,” Twinning explains.65 India has been alarmed by China’s increased militarization of Tibet, including the deployment of nuclear missiles targeting India. Twinning suggests China’s moves are related to worries in Beijing that the Dalai Lama will select a successor from traditional Tibetan cultural areas inside India rather than from within China.

International support for the government-in-exile and the Dalai Lama’s plan to select a successor, Bork argues, would prevent China from escalating pressure on the Tibet issue. “The kalon tripa gaining greater international recognition could ultimately put pressure on Beijing to moderate its policies within Tibet itself,” she adds.66

Supporting progress under Sangay, who reaffirms the Dalai Lama’s “Middle Way” solution of autonomy, not independence for Tibet, would also moderate Tibetan factions that support the use of force to achieve complete independence from China. A Congressional Report from 2008 put the question of divisions among Tibetans in terms of the Dalai Lama’s death, but these divisions could also grow apparent under a democratic system:

China appears to have calculated that it can out-wait the 72-year-old Dalai Lama, and that the demise of this compelling personality will result in the disintegration of the Tibetan movement altogether. But many westerners...see China’s continued rejection of the Dalai Lama’s “middle way” approach as increasingly having undercut his ability to influence younger, more militant Tibetans, who see his moderate approach as having brought nothing but opprobrium from Beijing. They believe his demise, without having reached an understanding from Beijing for greater Tibetan autonomy, would remove an important source of restraint on more ideological elements in the Tibetan community.67

More militant factions of the Tibetan community could threaten India and China’s delicate relations. “As India gets caught in this crossfire, its domestic political divisions on Tibet are also likely to get sharper. ‘Doing nothing’ on Tibet may no longer be a policy option for New Delhi,” writes C. Raja Mohan in the *India Express.*

Ahead of Chinese president Hu Jintao March 2012 visit to India, a 27-year-old Tibetan refugee self-immolated in Delhi. Indian security forces then arrested more than 250 Tibetan activists and effectively put the entire Tibetan community on
house arrest, shutting down the Tibetan settlement in Delhi in order to prevent any further protests. An Indian activist complains that geopolitical concerns outweigh the ideals of the Indian independence movement when it comes to Tibet. India no longer uses the "suzerainty" to describe the relationship between Tibet and China, but it supports Tibetan autonomy within China.

Despite China’s concerns about Tibetan democracy, Sangay believes that Western support for Tibetan government-in-exile will serve Western interests by promoting democracy within China. “Once [the Chinese] grant autonomy to Tibet, they will come around to embrace diversity, which will be the beginning of the real democratization of China," he told Foreign Policy.

Sangay expressed confidence in his speech to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission: “Buddhism has been around for 2,500 years, the Chinese Communist Party for merely 90. I believe we will outlast them.”

Religious Implications of Chinese Policy
Due to the contentious nature of Tibetan independence and continued international interest in the issue, much of Chinese policy has been carried out to assert control over Tibet and prevent foreign intervention. However, the ongoing pressure from the Chinese government has impacted the very nature of Tibetan Buddhism itself.

Until the current Dalai Lama, nine generations of Lamas had represented Tibet as political and spiritual leaders. Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the Dalai Lama was forced to appeal to the norms of the international community, resulting in his endorsement of democracy as a means of choosing Tibet’s leadership. This represented a major shift in the direction of Tibetan Buddhism; for centuries, the Dalai Lama was the leader of a nation in which religion and governance were closely intertwined. Now, the Dalai Lama’s influence is purely from his position as a religious and cultural spokesman for Tibetans, even as he continues to live in exile.

In the fight to keep Tibet under Chinese control, the government in Beijing has engaged in numerous activities to gain authority over the direction of Tibetan Buddhism. A key tenet of this sect is the lineage of various Lamas, traditionally chosen by other religious leaders; in 1995, the exiled Dalai Lama selected the 10th Panchen Lama. Just five days later, the boy disappeared. Within months, Chinese officials selected their own Panchen Lama, asserting Beijing’s ability to shape the leadership of Tibetan Buddhism.

In addition to seizing control of the Tibetan Buddhist leadership, the Chinese government has engaged in numerous “patriotic education” programs targeting monks and nuns at Tibetan monasteries. These programs seek to indoctrinate the backbone of Tibetan Buddhism through “hailing communism, Chinese law and China’s role in Tibet.” Individuals who refuse to participate – or those identified as dissidents – are punished accordingly, leading to expulsions and arrests.
These measures have had an indelible impact on Tibetan Buddhism. As time goes on and China continues its hold over Tibet, the religion of this mountainous land increasingly represents a state-sanctioned version of its former self.

**Where to go from here?**

After a tumultuous 2011, the international community is left with a decision of whether prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile will carry the same weight politically as the Dalai Lama. Western democracies must choose between recognizing a democratically elected leader and continuing to acquiesce to a rising world power in China.

If the prime minister gains recognition from the international community, China will be forced to respond with the same threats it made about recognizing and meeting with the Dalai Lama. Tibet will continue to be a thorn in the side of China’s relations with other states. If not, international attention to Tibet may wane, making it less of an issue affecting Chinese foreign policy.

“If Tibet is to survive as an equal member of the modern international community, it should reflect the collective potential of all its citizens, and not rely on one individual,” the Dalai Lama wrote in “Guidelines for Future Tibet’s Polity and the Basic Features of its Constitution” in 1992. Time will tell whether it ever will.

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5 “Suzerainty,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary
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11 Thurman, 26-29
13 Thurman, 30
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15 “Background, Central Tibetan Administration” (http://www.tibet.net/en/index.php?id=14)
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22 Interview with Soni
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Tempa Tsering, Interview with author, Delhi, India, March 14, 2012.

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Discussion Questions

1. How does the Dalai Lama threaten Chinese legitimacy in Tibet?
2. How has the Dalai Lama attempted to raise global support for Tibet?
3. What measures has China taken to ensure that other nations do not interfere in Tibet? What types of influence does China hold over these nations, and how does the Chinese government utilize their influence?
4. Historically, Tibet has been a region in which religion and governance are strongly linked. How has China – a very secular state – addressed this?
5. The issue of Tibetan independence or autonomy is complicated and deals with religion, economics, and politics. Does Tibet ever have a chance to gain any sort of independence from China? Why or why not?