The Tibet-China Conflict and Controversy

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I. Introduction

Last year before the Olympics, the Tibetans’ protests against China began on 10 March, and escalated on 10 March. Hundreds of lamas took to street in Lhasa. They threw rocks at the police and burnt up police cars, fighting for independence. Later on the police drew guns to suppress the revolt. There were arrests and many Tibetans went to the police station to demand the release of those detained. The Chinese government sent armies to quell the rebellion, causing the death of over 100 Tibetans. Since the protest against China raged during the Olympics in 2008, the international attention was focusing on the territory once again.

After seeing this tumultuous event, I was curious about the history and the causes of conflicts between China and Tibet. A while ago, this incident was seriously canvassed throughout the world. Therefore, I read some books, news reports and some websites discussing the issue and started working on this study.

What caused the Tibetans to hold the demonstration? Whether the incident was a provocation or cultural conflict is the issue discussed in the following sections.
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II. Thesis

The status of Tibet is at the core of the dispute, as it has been for all parties drawn into it over the past century. The Dalai Lama claims Tibet was independent and has been colonized by China, while on the other hand, China maintains its sovereignty over Tibet goes back over centuries and has always been a province of China. Given the fact they both relatively hold on to their opposing points of view, the conflict between Tibet and China has continually raged since 1949.

In the early twenties, the British attempted to obtain Tibet with different strategies, so the Russians helped the Manchu Dynasty preserve the territory. However, Tibet took advantage of the Chinese republican revolution and sought to split up from China with the help of Britain. Tibet then signed the Shimla treaty with Britain and claimed the sovereignty of Tibet, but the Chinese didn’t admit it.[1] Since then, the controversy on the territory remained unclear and caused conflicts later on.

In 1959, the Chinese took over Tibet and has been in power till today.

1. Tibet and China

The argument about whether Tibet was an independent state rages to this day with lawyers from both sides digging up learned reasons from the mists of history.[2] The following are some viewpoints from both the Chinese and the Tibetans.

1.1 The sovereignty over Tibet

1.1.1 China’s view

“For more than 700 years, the central government of China has continuously exercised sovereignty over Tibet, and Tibet has never been an independent state. No government of any country in the world has ever recognized Tibet as an independent state. (People's Daily, April 2008)”[3] China stated Tibet had always been a part of China since the mid-13th Century, so all the military intervention is just coping with domestic affairs.

1.1.2 Tibetan view
Recording to the histories recorded in foreign countries, Tibet has maintained an independent state status equally with its neighboring countries. It was obvious that Tibet was an independent state in fact and law and hadn’t been reigned over until 1950 when the Chinese government invaded. [4] Never had China claimed this right on the basis of its military conquest in 1949 or alleged effective control over Tibet since then or since 1959. [5] After the Dalai Lama led Tibetans to resist the Chinese domination but failed, they fled to India and established the Government of Tibet in Exile to date.

1.2 The responsibility for the recent unrest in Tibet

1.2.1 China’s view

The Chinese government possesses sufficient evidence to prove that the Lhasa incident is part of the 'Tibetan people's uprising movement' organized by the Dalai clique. Its purpose was to create crisis in China by staging coordinated sabotage activities in Tibet. [6] The Beijing Olympics in 2008 was their last straw to raise international attention toward Tibet Independence.

1.2.2 Tibetan view

Since the conflict from 1951, the Chinese were very violent toward the Tibetans, and the Tibetans could not fight back because they believed in non-violence and resolving issues peacefully.

Recently, the protests were fuelled by day-to-day grievances, as well as a desire for Tibetan independence. Moreover, many Tibetans are angry with the increasing number of Han Chinese migrants arriving in the region, accusing them of taking the best jobs. [7] In short, Tibetans felt that they have fallen behind in the economic boom that coastal provinces are enjoying; yet they are suffering from China's increasing inflation.

2. Main Reasons

2.1 Both sides disagree with what they respectively stated about the legal status of Tibet. [8]

2.2 Tibetan Points of View

2.2.1 Tibetans want autonomy (like that of Hong-Kong) and not independence.
2.2.2 The Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) is only 1/3 of the whole of Tibet, and is not even under a full autonomy.[9]

2.2.3 The Chinese government destroyed Temples and Monasteries (6000+).[9]

2.2.4 The Chinese government refuses to discuss the issue with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

2.2.5 The Chinese Government is destroying Tibet to make unnecessary railways, which the Chinese say are for the good of the Tibetans, but they actually strengthen Chinese rule as it is easier and faster to send troops.

2.2.6 The Tibetans are treated as second-class citizens on their own land.

2.3 China’s Points of View

2.3.1 Tibet had always been a part of China even in the old days before declaring independence.

2.3.2 Railways are there to help strengthen the Tibetan economy and not for China’s own purposes.

2.3.3 Transportation of resources such as gold and copper are useful for both the Chinese and the Tibetan economies.[10]

2.3.4 The Han Chinese (Chinese living in China) do not get as much freedom as the Tibetan people are getting now so it is unfair for the Tibetans to be complaining about Tibet not being an autonomous region. [10]

3. The Conflict During Olympics in 2008

International attention was focused on the territory in 2008 during the run-up to the Beijing Olympics. However, when the planned torch route went through Tibet to the summit of Mt. Everest, it was to assert that China wanted to use the Olympics to prove that Tibet is an inalienable part of China and that Tibetans are happy to live under Chinese rule.

Currently, Tibet is not recognized as a country by the United Nation and has no representation as such. Therefore, on 10 March in China, during the Olympics, Buddhist monks marched from monasteries in and around Lhasa to mark the 49th anniversary of the Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule. Many Tibetans expressed their feelings about China's violation of human rights, as well as educated the rest of the world about their situation through protests and demonstrations.[11]
This time, not only the international attention was caught by the demonstration during the Olympics, but also campaigners both inside and outside China were using the publicity surrounding the event to highlight their particular concerns.

4. The Attitude of the World

In the 20th century, many countries established official relationship with Tibet. In 1949, the government of Nepal confirmed that they recognized Tibet as an independent figure internationally in their application for the membership of United Nations.

However, in the past 50 years, as China’s influence has increased, many of Tibet’s allies turned to China and made trading agreements Therefore, with the international close attention to Tibet, this issue has been discussed in lots of United Nation’s occasions, and the UN has adopted the proposal to condemn China for violating the Tibetan s’ rights and their autonomy. [12]

America denounced China for intervening in Tibetan affairs, ruthlessly quelling Tibetans and disbanding the Tibet government. United States Department of State refuted China’s version of the Tibet status, and declared that USA now and always would consider Tibet as an autonomous country set up under China as its suzerain. The Great Britain claimed their usual standpoint, recognizing the Chinese government has the sovereignty in Tibet but Tibet is an autonomous region under China. Most of the non-communistic countries also censured China’s action in Tibet.

Nowadays, although China has invested in the economy in Tibet, rights groups point to widespread mistreatment of the Tibetan population and a denial of religious and political freedom.[13]

5. Future

The Dalai Lama calls on the Tibetans to fight for their autonomous rights with bigger determination and devotion because Tibetans are like all the people that they have their own rights to do so. In 1975, the International Court of Justice declared that self-determination is an acknowledged regulation that cannot be expropriated. That makes Tibet keep on protesting in the future.[14]
III. Conclusion

Tibet and China’s history of conflict started since over half a century ago. However, both sides couldn’t make an appropriate concession to deal with the problem. Over years of history, treaties, conflicts and contracts complicated the relationship between Tibet and China, so now the status of Tibet remained unclear. But according to records worldwide, the invading action in 1951 clearly tells that China did not get the proper sovereignty over Tibet. Yet on the one hand, China claims that Tibet has already been a part of China since the Manchu government, while Tibet announced that it is an independent state and has its own sovereignty over the territory.

The international society has always regarded Tibet as a part of China, but the status of Tibet was never stated clearly. Actually, Tibet was an independent country when it was annexed. China did not obtain the Tibet’s sovereignty effectively because what China said did not correspond with its principle, which was to ban the armed annexation.

In conclusion, according to the international records and laws, Tibet today still has the legal status as an independent state. The Government of Tibet in Exile is its legal representative of having the proper power to govern its country. Therefore, China’s sustained occupation in Tibet has seriously transgressed the international law.
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IV. Reference

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[12]西藏的法律地位・達蘭沙拉與北京(2001)。達賴喇嘛西藏宗教基金會印贈。
