



Hope for a Better Tibet Policy

by Willy Lam



THE QUESTION OF “Who lost Tibet” is bound to haunt the Chinese Communist Party at least through to the 18th CCP Congress of 2012, when Party General Secretary and President Hu Jintao is set to hand over power to the “Fifth Generation” leadership headed by Vice President Xi Jinping. The ongoing disturbances in Tibet and four neighboring provinces, as well as the possible boycott of the opening ceremony of the Olympics by several Western countries, could become the biggest blot on the legacy of President Hu.

A revision to the CCP’s longstanding tough tactics against Tibetans as well as the “splitist Dalai Lama clique”—which the Hu leadership has accused of instigating the current anti-Beijing conspiracy—is unlikely in the near term. Yet the possibility cannot be ruled out that after 2012, Fifth-Generation stalwarts like Mr. Xi and Vice Premier Li Keqiang might undertake a reappraisal of Beijing’s policies toward increasingly restive ethnic minorities.

To assess the impact of the Tibetan disturbances on the Chinese political land-

scape, it is instructive to gauge the extraordinary nature of this frontal assault on the CCP’s authority. In terms of numbers and geographical distribution, the series of protests that first hit Lhasa, capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region on March 10 is the most horrendous display of anti-Beijing and anti-Han Chinese sentiments since the 1959 Tibet Insurrection, after which the Dalai Lama fled to India.

According to reports in internal news digests for senior CCP cadres, more than 30,000 Tibetans took part in nearly 100 “mass incidents” of varying size in Tibet and the provinces of Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai and Yunnan. The March 2008 cases of what Beijing calls “beating, looting, smashing and burning” are thus much more serious than disturbances in February and March 1989. That culminated in ruthless suppression when then Tibet Party Secretary Hu Jintao ordered the paramilitary People’s Armed Police to use live ammunition against the “rioters.”

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There seems little doubt that authorities in both Beijing and Tibet have to bear at least political responsibility for faulty intelligence and inadequate precautionary measures to forestall these blatant acts of defiance. In internal briefings to cadres nationwide, President Hu and his colleagues had warned that underground groups in the two regions would, in collusion with “hostile, anti-China elements in the West,” stage incidents to embarrass Beijing in the run-up to the Olympics in August. More People’s Liberation Army units as well as PAP officers were ordered into Tibet and Xinjiang before snowfall last year. Blanket surveillance and arrests of suspects began in earnest in the winter. For instance, police shot dead two suspects and arrested 15 ethnic Uighur activists during a PAP swoop on an underground, “terrorist” group in Urumqi last January.

Despite all this, PLA, PAP as well as state-security officers guarding Tibet failed to anticipate that recalcitrant lamas and their followers throughout Tibetan communities in five provinces could stage a quasirebellion of such magnitude. Since the 1989 riots, PAP officers and state security agents have been stationed inside major monasteries within the TAR. Yet Tibetan and central authorities seemed to be caught off guard by the March 10 rally, which marked the 49th anniversary of the 1959 insurrection.

Local and foreign eyewitness to the March 14 riots—in which 13 Han Chinese were allegedly killed—said they were surprised that few police were on hand during much of the rampage. Authorities in the neighboring provinces of Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai and Yunnan were also slow to respond to demonstrations in towns and counties with large Tibetan communities.

And then there is Beijing’s failure to win the hearts and minds of Tibetans despite record amounts of transfer payments to and massive commercial investments in the autonomous region. The central government

spent 96.87 billion yuan (\$13.8 billion) in the TAR in the four decades from 1965 to 2005. Since 1993, 90% of the revenues of the TAR administration came from Beijing’s largesse. The region’s GDP reached 34.2 billion yuan in 2007, meaning that Tibetans have a comparatively high per capita GDP of 12,000 yuan (\$1,712). Many coastal and even central provinces and cities have to observe “aid-Tibet quotas,” meaning they must regularly help the TAR through means including building factories and helping local farmers and technicians. The registered capital of domestic Chinese enterprises in Tibet was 22.3 billion yuan in 2007, up 54% from five years ago.

Yet from the Tibetan point of view, capital outlays are just one more way Beijing tries to Sinicize the region. The two-year-old Qinghai-Tibet Railway, which was built at a cost of \$4.2 billion, is seen as a symbol of Beijing’s effort to control the ethnic minorities through Han Chinese migration, or what the Dalai Lama has called “demographic aggression.” In non-winter months, an estimated 6,000 Chinese—mostly tourists but also traders—flock into Lhasa every day. The capital’s population has swollen to 300,000 with Han Chinese outnumbering Tibetans by two to one. Radical monks in the TAR say that if no action is taken, the erosion of Tibetan culture will become irrevocable within a few years.

The extent and ferocity of the March protests means that despite the mass arrests of monks and other “instigators,” Tibet remains a time bomb that could at any moment shatter Beijing’s increasingly fragile control over the Himalayan redoubt. Moreover, Chinese authorities’ repeated broadcast of propaganda footage of Lhasa “rioters” attacking defenseless Chinese residents has further exacerbated antagonism between Tibetans and Han Chinese.

Who then will have to shoulder the blame for this colossal policy failure? Given the fact that President Hu is the only mem-

ber of the Politburo Standing Committee with experience in the TAR, he can hardly shirk responsibility for growing instability in one of China's most strategic regions. Moreover, as chairman of the Central Military Commission since 2004, Mr. Hu is responsible for the deployment of PLA and PAP units around the country.

Much more important is the fact that most of the cadres running western China are protégés of the 65-year-old supremo. Having spent 21 years of his career in Gansu, Guizhou and Tibet provinces, Mr. Hu has taken a personal interest in the appointment of top officials in TAR, the Xinjiang Autonomous Region and neighboring provinces. Many of these "western warlords" are veteran members of the Communist Youth League faction—which is headed by Mr. Hu, who ran the league from 1983-85.

The most senior of these Hu cronies is Politburo member Wang Lequan, who headed the CYL's Shandong branch in the 1980s. Mr. Wang owes his promotion to the Politburo in 2002 to Mr. Hu, who has kept his protégé in the top Xinjiang post for 12 years. While Mr. Wang fights what he calls "wreckers, separatists and terrorists" among the Uighur population, he advises President Hu on the overall policy of "pacification" of ethnic minorities through a mixture of economic aid, iron-fisted control, and relentless Sinicization.

The cadre who bears direct responsibility for the Tibet mess is TAR Party Secretary Zhang Qingli, who doubles as political commissar of the PAP's Tibet command. Mr. Zhang, a former deputy to Mr. Wang in the XAR, was appointed to his current post in mid-2006. The 56-year-old Mr. Zhang worked closely with Mr. Hu in CYL headquarters in Beijing. It was Mr. Zhang who, at a meeting of cadres in Lhasa on March 15, first characterized Beijing's battle with the "Dalai Lama clique" as a "life-and-death struggle between ourselves and the enemies." Using language

reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Zhang said "we must wage a people's war to counter separatism and to maintain stability." Famous for his acerbic tongue, Mr. Zhang once called the Dalai Lama "a wolf in monk's clothes, a devil with a human face."

Other members of Mr. Hu's "western China clique" who have failed to, in Deng Xiaoping's words, "nip the forces of instability in the bud," include the party secretaries and governors of the four provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan. A look at their careers demonstrates the CYL faction's stranglehold on top slots in this crucial part of China. Like Zhang Qingli, newly appointed Sichuan Party Secretary Liu Qibao worked with Mr. Hu at CYL headquarters in the mid-1980s, while Qinghai Party Secretary Qiang Wei and Yunnan Governor Qin Guangrong are former chiefs of provincial-level CYL party committees. This runs counter to Deng Xiaoping's famous "credo of the five lakes and four seas"—officials from different backgrounds and factional affiliations should be considered for important posts.

The central government units that play a pivotal role in Tibetan and Xinjiang affairs—the National Nationalities Affairs Commission and the National Administration for Religious Affairs—are also dominated by Mr. Hu's trusted associates. Both the just-appointed NNAC minister, Yang Jing, and his predecessor Li Dezhu are former bosses of provincial CYL party committees. And NARA director, Ye Xiaowen, headed the Guizhou provincial CYL when Mr. Hu was party secretary of the province from 1985-88. Li Dezhu, who served as NNAC minister from 1998 until early this year, was an exponent of Sinicization as a solution to the "assimilation problem" of minority groupings. An ethnic Korean, Mr. Li has warned in recent speeches that "hostile enemy forces in the West" are behind a conspiracy to "Westernize and divide and

rule” China through establishing beachheads in regions with large ethnic minorities. Both Messrs. Li and Ye were behind the Draconian policy announced last year that the reincarnations of deceased lamas—including the successor of the Dalai Lama—must be ratified by Beijing authorities.

At least in the near term, none of Mr. Hu’s allies in Tibet and neighboring areas are expected to be penalized for “losing Tibet.” (So far, only a mid-ranked Tibet official, Danzeng Langjie, has been sacked apparently for mishandling the March crisis.) There is also little possibility of Beijing fine-tuning, let alone reversing, its take-no-prisoners approach toward Tibet in general and the “Dalai Lama clique” in particular. This is despite the fact that the Nobel Peace Prize laureate is an advocate of nonviolence and has tenuous control over factions within the “free Tibet” movement. The younger, radical leaders do not rule out nonpeaceful tactics against their Beijing oppressors.

It is perhaps for fear of further alienating global opinion that the CCP leadership has reiterated its willingness to “reopen dialogue” with the Dalai Lama. While visiting Laos in late March, Premier Wen Jiabao repeated a pledge he made at the National People’s Congress a fortnight earlier that “the door for negotiation remains open” provided that the Lama would recognize that Tibet and Taiwan were “inalienable parts of the Chinese territory.” Chinese sources familiar with Beijing’s Tibetan policies say, however, that as PAP and state security personnel go about rounding up more monks and “rabble-rousers” in the run-up to the Olympics, the possibilities for talks are remote.

In the meantime, free-thinking intellectuals as well as members of the CCP’s marginalized liberal wing have urged the authorities to consider reverting to the more magnanimous Tibetan policy initiated by disgraced party chief, Hu Yaobang. In the early 1980s, the late Hu, an early

leader of the CYL and a patron of President Hu, won a broad following among Tibetans for the zeal with which he went about repairing damages done to monasteries and Buddhist relics during the Cultural Revolution. The late Hu also reduced the number of Han-Chinese cadres in TAR and was the first to invite emissaries of the Dalai Lama to Beijing for “reconciliation talks.”

Another big-name advocate of tolerant policies toward ethnic minorities was deceased party elder Xi Zhongxun. An ally of Hu Yaobang, Xi ran the CCP’s Northwest Bureau, which was in charge of provinces such as Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang in the 1950s. Brushing aside objections from die-hard conservatives such as Chairman Mao Zedong and General Wang Zhen, Xi masterminded conciliatory measures that prevented bloody confrontation with Tibetans and Uighurs. Xi’s eldest son Xi Jinping, a former governor of Fujian province and party boss of Zhejiang province, is due to become China’s party chief in 2012 and state president in 2013. There is no definite indication that the younger Xi is as liberal as his father, or that he would want to challenge the scorched-earth ethnic policy initiated by President Hu. However, it is in the interest of every new CCP supremo to establish his credentials by exposing—albeit in an indirect fashion—policy mistakes of his predecessor. Deng savaged Mao’s legacy. And the Hu-Wen team has launched a crusade to rectify former President Jiang Zemin’s penchant for putting coastal development above improving the livelihood of disadvantaged sectors, including peasants in western China.

Despite his long experience in western China, President Hu has turned Tibet and swathes of Sichuan, Qinghai and Gansu into a virtual powder keg. And the possibility remains that to win back Tibet—and to establish his credibility—Mr. Xi may yet attempt to resurrect the more rational minority policies associated with his father. ■