

Chinese White Paper rejects dialogue with Tibet

by Lionel Kesenne

In an unheralded move, the Chinese government is proposing a new direction in its relations with Tibet that seems to reject the possibility for continued dialogue with the Dalai Lama. The dialogue has continued on and off for years with little apparent progress. The new White Paper on "Regional ethnic autonomy in Tibet", published in May, refers to the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet in 1951 and the "regional ethnic autonomy" Of Tibet under the unified leadership of the Beijing government. The Tibetan government-in-exile, led by their spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, has not directly addressed the content of the White Paper but has called for further dialogue based upon proper autonomy status within China.

The White Paper seems to be a follow-up to a document issued in June 2002 on "Tibetan Culture" and follows the publication of a policy document dealing with China's relations with the European Union. Published in October 2003, ahead of the sixth EU-China Summit, the policy document contained strong references to China's attitude to Tibet and "requested" the EU not to have any contact with the so-called government-in-exile. China maintained the position that the Tibetan government constituted "separatist activities" and, therefore, should not receive any assistance from the EU.

The White Paper on Tibet appears to be an attempt to arbitrarily settle all outstanding questions on the Tibetan issue. Under China's principle of autonomy, Tibet enjoys full political, economic and social rights. Its traditional culture, language and religion are protected and promoted. However, the Paper rejects the proposal put forward by the Dalai Lama that Tibet should enjoy a status under the one-country two-systems formula.

The abrupt departure announced in the White Paper seemingly heralding the end of negotiations has taken the Tibetans and the EU by surprise. Several rounds of talks, between the EU and US representatives of the Dalai Lama with the Chinese, had taken place since 2002. Although no substantial progress was announced, the talks seemed to indicate some flexibility on the Chinese side. Equally, in the face of international criticism over its human rights record, the talks did allow Beijing to fend off attacks about its treatment of minorities. One of the consequences of the new hardline stance may be to widen the existing split amongst Tibetans, over whether to accept proper autonomy or settle only for full independence.

Since the attacks of 11th September 2001, the profile of the Tibetan movement has suffered as international attention and the policies of both the United States and the EU have shifted towards the fight against terrorism. Many international leaders now regularly refuse to meet the Dalai Lama to avoid annoying Beijing. China knows it can crackdown on domestic opposition away from the glare of international attention and may have been emboldened following the agreement with India, whereby New Delhi accepted that Tibet was a part of China. Equally, China's increasing problems with, for example, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the US presence in Central Asia seems to be pushing Beijing to adopt a harder stance on some issues. However, it is

difficult to see what advantage accrues to Beijing by giving up the internationally-welcomed series of talks with the representatives of the Dalai Lama.

It is suggested that the White Paper could reflect the unfinished transition from the Jiang Zemin era to Hu Jintao, the new President. Jiang, who is still president of the Central Military Commission, is known for his tough stance on Taiwan and Hong Kong.

That the contents of the White Paper took everyone by surprise can be deduced from the long time it took for an official response from the Tibetan government-in-exile. A statement issued on 6th July, to mark the birthday of the Dalai Lama, reaffirms the Tibetan “Middle Way Approach” which calls for full autonomy for Tibet short of independence. Speaking to *EurAsia Bulletin*, the Representative of the Dalai Lama to the EU, Mr Kelsang Gyaltsen, confirmed that the government-in-exile regretted the harsh tone of the White Paper but still believed that direct negotiation offered the best way forward.

In a statement issued in mid June, the European Commission called for contact between the Dalai Lama and Beijing. Favouring direct dialogue as the “only realistic way to find a lasting solution”, the Commission wants to see a “strengthening and deepening” of the negotiations. Speaking to *EurAsia Bulletin*, a Commission official indicated that the question of Tibet was just one of many issues under discussion in EU-China relations. Similarly, the response of the EU Council of Ministers to China’s position on the Tibetan question has been muted. The EU-China Summit of October 2003 made no mention of Tibet.

China seems to be content to play the waiting game. Yet, the failure to reach a negotiated settlement within the lifetime of the Dalai Lama may leave China with far greater problems in the long run. ■

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See also:

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