

## **Sino-Tibetan relations: dialogue is possible**

by Kelsang Gyaltzen

After our escape from Tibet in 1959, in late 1978, when China emerged from the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, His Holiness the Dalai Lama established our first direct contact with the Chinese leadership. Over many years His Holiness did his best to engage the Chinese leadership in an honest dialogue to resolve the issue of Tibet. Unfortunately, a lack of political will and vision on the part of the Chinese leadership resulted in their failure to reciprocate his numerous initiatives. Finally, in August 1993 our formal contact with the Chinese government came to an end.

This did not deter His Holiness in the quest for freedom and peace for Tibet. He instructed my senior colleague Lodi Gyari, the Representative to the United States, and myself to explore informal channels of communication with the Beijing leadership. In the course of time we were able to establish a few channels through private persons and semi-officials. During this period three rounds of meetings were held at secrete locations.

In June 1998, when US President Bill Clinton visited China, President Jiang discussed Tibet with him at some length. Addressing a joint press conference, President Jiang sought a public clarification from His Holiness the Dalai Lama on some issues before resuming dialogue and negotiations. We communicated to the Chinese government that His Holiness was, in principle, willing to respond to President Jiang's statement and that we wished to begin informal consultations before making such a statement public.

In late autumn that year, however, without any obvious reason, all our channels of communication were shut down. Accompanying this development we detected a noticeable hardening of the Chinese position on dialogue, in their attitude towards His Holiness and an intensified new round of repression in Tibet.

Despite this setback, His Holiness encouraged and inspired us to continue our efforts and to explore all available avenues. As a result, in January 2002, a first face-to-face meeting took place outside of China with Chinese officials responsible Tibet policy. This meeting paved the way for the visit of a four-member Tibetan delegation to China and to the Tibetan capital Lhasa from 9th-25th September 2002. It was the first time since 1980 that representatives of His Holiness the Dalai Lama were able to visit Lhasa. The visit provided us with an opportunity to meet with senior Chinese officials responsible for Tibet as well as with a number of top Tibetan officials.

The task of our delegation on that trip was two fold. First, to re-establish direct contact with the leadership in Beijing and to create a conducive atmosphere enabling direct face-to-face meetings on a regular basis in future. Secondly, to explain His Holiness the Dalai Lama's "Middle Way Approach" towards resolving the issue of Tibet. Throughout our trip we focussed our efforts towards building confidence by dispelling misconceptions and distrust.

Between 25th May and 8th June 2003 we made a second visit. The visit followed upon the changes in leadership of the Chinese Communist Party as well as of the

Chinese Government and gave us the opportunity to engage extensively with the new Chinese leaders and officials responsible for Tibet and our relationship. We were also able to meet with Chinese Buddhist leaders.

On both missions to China our meetings with senior Chinese officials took place in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. The exchanges of views and positions were extensive and candid. However, there were no new elements in the formal statements of the Chinese leaders on Tibet or on negotiations. Both sides had a positive assessment of direct contact. The Chinese side explicitly acknowledged the positive efforts on the part of the exiled Tibetan leadership and especially the positive statements by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to create a constructive environment for the continuation of the present process. It was also clear and obvious that the Chinese side had been watching very carefully the reactions by the international community and in the world media about this development. They were impressed and pleased about the positive comments and reactions.

My colleague Mr Lodi Gyari and I returned from our two missions confident that the present contact would continue. When we left China on 8th June 2003 no date for a third round of meetings had been fixed. A few months back in order to maintain the momentum of the process, we let our Chinese counterparts know that we would like to make a third visit at the earliest convenient date. We are yet to receive an answer. However, we remain confident about receiving a positive answer soon.

From our visits it was clear that on many fundamental issues the gaps between the positions of two the parties are not insurmountable. In our view, one of the biggest problems we face is the lack of trust that exists. There are deep-rooted misconceptions and strong distrust between the two sides. It has been clear that the Chinese side is interpreting a number of actions of the Tibetan leadership, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as being inconsistent with the stated objective of reaching an agreement within the framework of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Obviously, this distrust and misconception cannot be resolved by a few visits. However, an important beginning has been made to reduce the level of mutual distrust. Now it is important to continue this process and for both parties to demonstrate their sincerity and trustworthiness to the other by taking small tangible steps to build trust and confidence. It is a delicate process, requiring both quiet diplomacy and some very public gestures and initiatives.

What is presently most disturbing and of great concern to us is that there have been no positive changes inside Tibet since the opening of direct contact with the Chinese leadership. Nor has Beijing so far reciprocated the confidence building measures undertaken by the Tibetan leadership in exile after our first visit. The situation and developments inside Tibet continue to be very grave. The sad reality of Tibet is that an entire people with its distinct culture, religion, language and national identity is facing the threat of total assimilation and extinction. Today, the Tibetan people are one of the most endangered ethnic communities in this 21st Century.

Unfortunately, it seems there is a section in the Chinese leadership who oppose any dialogue on Tibet because they seem to believe that with the passing away of His Holiness, the Tibetan issue itself would fade away naturally. These hard-liners favour

a policy of “raising the banner of negotiations high, but working to stop the Dalai Lama’s return”.

Without doubt, in the absence of the restraining influence of His Holiness, the Tibetan struggle will become radicalised, making it infinitely more difficult to achieve and implement a negotiated settlement. Not only would the Tibetan people be bereft of a great leader, the Chinese government, too, will be compelled to admit that all her successive governments had failed to reach an agreement with the Dalai Lama and to get his acceptance of their presence in Tibet. The 14th Dalai Lama will leave a political legacy of unwavering resistance to foreign occupation and rule. This powerful political legacy will inspire generations of Tibetans to come and the world public will remember forever that the 14th Dalai Lama had never accepted Chinese rule in Tibet. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the only person who could persuade Tibetans to accept an agreement with the Chinese government that would recognise Tibet to be part of the PRC. Without His Holiness it would be very difficult to maintain this moderate and peaceful approach in the long run.

Furthermore, the Chinese leaders have repeatedly expressed concern that the issue of Tibet should not be used by foreign powers against China. With increased instability in Central Asia, leaving the Tibetan issue unresolved will sooner or later make it vulnerable to outside interest. Until now the undisputed and principled leadership of His Holiness has prevented that from happening. But without His Holiness, the situation may very well change.

Consequently, a clear-headed analysis of the issue of Tibet must conclude that time is neither on the side of the Tibetans nor of the government of the PRC. Time is running out for both sides to reach a mutually acceptable resolution.

Presently, China is undergoing profound changes and the country’s leadership has passed on to a new generation. Whether the coming changes in China will bring new life and new hope for Tibet and whether China establishes herself as a reliable, constructive, peaceful leading member of the international community depends largely on whether China continues to define herself mainly through military and economic power or whether she decides to commit herself to the values and principles of democracy, freedom and the rule of human rights and define her strength through them. This decision by China, in turn, will be influenced to a large degree by the attitude and policies of the international community towards China. In this context, it is not solely in the hands of the Chinese leaders whether the Tibetan people will be able to enjoy a life in freedom and dignity in future or be compelled to live under continued repression. The outcome will be determined just as much by the policies of the European Union towards the Tibetan issue and China.

A case in point is the recent resumption of direct contact. There is no doubt in our mind that the strong international concern for Tibet has been one of the major factors in the considerations of Chinese leaders for agreeing to our visits. It is, therefore, necessary that the international community continues to remain engaged with the Chinese leaders on the issue of Tibet in order to lead the present process towards substantive negotiations. It is important to continue to demonstrate strong interest in the progress of the present process and to encourage and urge the Chinese leadership to enter into earnest negotiations. ■

Kelsang Gyaltzen is the Representative of the Dalai Lama to the EU. Mr Gyaltzen contributed this comment to *EurAsia Bulletin* before China published its new White Paper on “Regional ethnic autonomy in Tibet”. For an analysis of the White Paper see page 10 in this issue.

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