

**BEIJING'S TIBET PROBLEM:
POLICIES AND DILEMMAS**

BO Zhiyue & CHEN Gang

EAI Background Brief No. 384

Date of Publication: 26 May 2008

Executive Summary

Recent riots in Tibet and elsewhere in China have revealed Beijing's dilemmas in its policies toward Tibetans.

First, there is an integration dilemma. If Beijing does not exercise an effective control over Tibet, the Tibetan independence forces may succeed in forcing China into surrendering its sovereignty over a territory that has been very well recognized as a part of China. If Beijing's control is very effective, this tight control could be perceived as oppression.

Second, there is a religious dilemma. If Beijing does not allow Tibetans religious freedom, it could be blamed for its "cultural genocidal" policy against Tibetan Buddhism. If Beijing allows the revival of religious freedom in Tibet, it will have to tolerate the worship of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal leader of the separatist forces.

Third, there is a development dilemma. If Beijing does not promote economic and social development in Tibet, it is vulnerable to accusations of leaving a powerless minority population behind in poverty. If Beijing helps to promote economic and social development, it will have to be responsible for the side effects of economic modernization.

Fourth, there is a public relations dilemma, in particular regarding the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is both a spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism and a shrewd politician. In his former role, he has a strong following in the West; in his latter role, he plays politics as much as any canny politician.

If Beijing fails to expose the Dalai Lama as a canny politician who lies constantly to win sympathy, Beijing is damned for its alleged cruel policies towards Tibetans. If Beijing openly criticizes the Dalai Lama for his lies, few in the West would want to listen, though Beijing's criticisms may be factually accurate.

Most fundamentally, in a world where the West, influenced by a romantic view of Tibet, has monopolized the discourse on human rights and freedom, Beijing is doomed to fail.

Beijing's control of its own territory can be perceived as aggression; its abolition of a serf/slave system in Tibet as "cultural genocide"; its introduction of medical care as the Han's attempt to harm Tibetans; its development programs as its attempt to destroy Tibetan culture and traditions; and its attempt to expose the Dalai Lama as showing disrespect to a peace-loving saint.

Under international pressure, Beijing has to have dialogues with the Dalai Lama's representatives. Yet there is no way that any Chinese government would give up its sovereignty over a strategic part of its territory simply because a Dalai Lama has complained. Nor is it conceivable that a Chinese government would allow the formation of a "Greater Tibet" (which covers one quarter of its territory and includes 24 other nationalities besides Tibetans) for Tibetans alone.

There appears to be no solution to the issue of Tibet. This is not because that Beijing is not flexible enough, nor is it because the world community is too appeasing. It is because the issue of Tibet does not exist in reality. It is a fabrication.

From this perspective, recent earthquake in Sichuan Province is a blessing in disguise. With a death toll of 62,664 as at 26 May 2008 and likely to reach 80,000, the earthquake has become the focus of the Chinese and international media. The Chinese government's swift responses to the disaster and its transparency in releasing information on the disaster have won praises from all countries. In this context, the Tibet issue is placed on the back burner at least for the time being.