

To what extent is the Dalai Lama a threat to China?

Questions surrounding the Dalai Lama, Tibet and China usually come with a large degree of controversy due to the tense situation presiding in the Tibetan region. However, here, I will not be delving into debates surrounding the legitimacy of the Chinese presence in Tibet as this stands as a different topic. Since 1950, Tibet is recognized as an autonomous region under the People's Republic of China and will be referred to as such in this essay. My focus will instead be inclined on attempting to understand to what extent the Dalai Lama is a threat to China and its sovereignty. I will contend that the 14th Dalai Lama is a potent threat, a claim that will be extrapolated in my three-part explanation. This analysis will first start with an evaluation of the Dalai Lama and his role as a religio-political actor and the values he represents. I will then move on to examining how the Tibetan 'God-King' presents a threat to China due to his bestowed role as unifying figurehead of the Tibetan independence movement. In this section, I will analyse elements of conflict, claims of injustice and domination between China and its Tibetan region through the case studies of the 1987 Tibetan riots and 2008 Beijing Olympics. In my final area of analysis, I will be studying what threat the Dalai Lama represents contra Chinese sovereignty. It will be especially intriguing to better understand how the Dalai Lama's actions may push different Chinese regions to demand further autonomy if his threat does not subside. Furthermore, this section will permit me to question how this religio-political leader stands as a destabilising factor vis-à-vis China's more secular religious policy. Throughout my research I will be analysing an admixture of primary and secondary sources, ranging from statements made by the Dalai Lama himself to journal articles and

books. As of now, before embarking on a full-fledged analysis, I must evaluate the Dalai Lama and his status.

An Unusual Status

To begin with, the Dalai Lama occupies an unusual role in Tibetan society, as he is simultaneously perceived as both the religious and political leader of all Tibetans. “The immense majority of Tibetans look upon him as their spiritual and temporal leader” and refer to him frequently as ‘the god-king’ (Donnet, 1994: 176), which can be seen as a sign highlighting his dual role. His status in Tibetan society deeply affects his followers who “out of profound devotion to the Dalai Lama, [...] accept his choices and decisions instead of trusting their own judgement” (Donnet, 1994: 181). Upon this, Tibetans take it upon themselves to execute any of his commands, whether they are religious or political and “equate criticising the Dalai Lama with blasphemy” (Donnet, 1994: 176). The reason the Dalai Lama harbours such power and stands as a political and religious actor can be seen in the fabric of the Tibetan society that existed prior to Tibet’s 1950 incorporation into China. I postulate here that it is this special ‘religio-political’ societal order that transmitted to Tibetans the norm and values they have to this day, and subsequently can be seen as a reason why the Dalai Lama has such an elevated status. Franz Michael elaborates that this ‘religio-political’ “system remained in force from the 17th century until the Chinese take over [...] during those centuries, the system of government was sanctioned by the religious authority of the Dalai Lama, which was absolute and [...] could not be challenged from outside or within” (1982: 40). More importantly, this society prior to Chinese rule had effectively merged both the political and religious sectors. Buddhist monasteries had religious purposes but “also provided the basic

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education and religious concepts on which the whole Tibetan political and social order was founded” (Michael, 1982: 40). Tibetan society was organized by “trained monk bureaucrats [who] formed the link between religious and secular affairs”, such an occurrence can be justified when taking into account that “the religious and the secular sectors both believed that the primary purpose of all endeavour was religious liberation” (Michael, 1982: 40). Consequently, today’s Tibetan population has retained much of these norms and values, which can be seen as the reason why they still recognize the Dalai Lama as their contemporary leader since religious belief orientates Tibetan politics. However, times have changed and the arrival of Communist rule has drastically transformed the political and religious landscape of Tibet. Alongside having been incorporated into China, the religio-political fabric upon which Tibetan society rested was shattered and a new order was formed after 1950. It is this exact order, brought about by Chinese rule that the Dalai Lama threatens, mainly because he stands as the sole unifying figurehead of a defunct religio-political society that once was. Subsequently, this links to my next section where I will explore how the Dalai Lama represents a menace to the political order in Chinese Tibet.

A Threat to Chinese Political Order in Tibet

As much as the Dalai Lama would like to relinquish his role as a political actor (Donnet, 1994: 176), this stands as being impossible due to the close link between religion and politics in Tibet’s prior state. Today, the mere existence of the Dalai Lama “remains the prime force uniting the Tibetans” (Donnet, 1994: 184) and can be seen as a considerable motivating force behind the Tibetan independence movement that seeks to secede from China. Although he does not directly fan the flames of violence and bellicosity between

China and the nationalist sentiments of certain Tibetans, the Dalai Lama nevertheless has a rhetoric that puts into question China's right to rule over the Tibetan province. His incessant accentuation of justice to be had in Tibet is a clear example that he postulates that Chinese presence in Tibet is unjust. The examples here are ripe, one such only occurred in April when he described "friends and supporters not as pro-Tibet or anti-Chinese, but as pro-justice" (Tibetoday, 2013). By labelling the Tibetan cause as just, he portrays Chinese rule as unjust and of dominating nature, which in this case, does contain the seeds of conflict and not peace. This type of threat the Dalai Lama poses to China can be seen as having materialized in September 1987 when he went on a ten-day visit to the United States armed with a five-point peace plan that went on to being supported by eight American Congressmen. Following the visit, it only took ten days for riots to materialize in Tibet; "On 1 October 1987, [...] by about 9 o'clock in the morning [...] the whole Tibetan quarter was covered in the rioting" (Donnet, 1994: 112), in the regional capital, Lhasa. This five point peace plan eventually led to three dark years of unrest in the Tibetan region as rioting erupted once more in March 1988 during the Monlam Chenmo festival where "monks grabbed the microphones and the whole [Jokhang] square rang with their shouts of 'free Tibet' [...] Long live the Dalai Lama!" (Donnet, 1994: 112). Tibetan rioters then "attacked a police station and destroyed vehicles in the downtown section of the Tibetan capital of Lhasa" (St. Petersburg Times, 1988). In March 1989, "Chinese residents of Lhasa [...] were stoned and shops and restaurants were burned [...] many foreigners saw Chinese bleeding that day." (Donnet, 1994: 127). Although one may argue that these events arose due to other contingent factors, there is a clear correlation between the Dalai Lama's international actions and instability in the Tibetan region, and

this, I argue, is directly related to the ‘God-King’ status and the societal values he embodies.

This can be further seen with the unrest that occurred in the lead up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics when the Dalai Lama released a statement on March 10, 2008 on the 49th anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising. In his address, the Dalai Lama paid “tribute to those brave men and women of Tibet who have endured untold hardships and sacrificed their lives for the cause of the Tibetan people” and elaborated “a major concern of the People's Republic of China is its lack of legitimacy in Tibet” (Gyatso, 2008a). Following this address, riots erupted on March 14 in the Gansu, Xichuan and Qinghai areas of Tibet, which the Chinese authorities halted with arrests and tighter security (Beck, 2008). While the Dalai Lama has never openly incited violence, his actions and peaceful protest have had a consistent destabilizing affect in Tibet with high loss of life and great social turmoil. From this, it is now possible to say that the Dalai Lama is a clear threat to the Chinese presence in Tibet and more importantly represents a threat to the safety of its inhabitants; pro-Tibetan and pro-Chinese alike. Overall, following the 2008 riots the Dalai Lama advanced that “he would step down as the head of Tibet's government-in-exile if that would stop the bloodshed” (Beck, 2008), but still has not done so even though he is evidently conscious of his share of responsibility in these two case studies.

A Menace to Chinese Sovereignty

Not only does the Dalai Lama threaten the political order in Chinese Tibet, but he also presents a menace to Chinese sovereignty in its entirety. To begin with, the first danger

that exists is the possibility that other separatist movements present in China, namely the Uighurs of the Xinjiang region who border Tibet, find a common cause with the Tibetans to secede from the People's Republic of China (PRC). This is why the Chinese government "will never accept [the Dalai Lama's calls for] [...] a self-governing Greater Tibet. For China's leadership, that demand amounts [...] as incitement to others, such as the Uighurs of Xinjiang to demand similar independence" (Liao, 2009). Amidst tensions between Uighur-Muslims and the Chinese government, the Communist Party cannot lend any credibility to the Dalai Lama, as his claims that the Chinese presence in Tibet is illegitimate attack the very foundations of Chinese sovereignty and its right to rule its people. Adding to this, the Dalai Lama's status stands as an antagonist figure to Chinese sovereignty due to his representation of a system that is in total contradiction with the one advocated by Beijing. In other words, the God-King status entrusted to him is contrary to the very ontological fabric of the Chinese secular political structure. Consequently, "demands that Tibetans living outside the boundaries of Tibet should fall under the autonomous structure the Dalai Lama seeks are, quite simply, not acceptable for the Chinese" (Liao, 2009) as this would mean the Communist Party sees legitimacy in the Dalai Lama's role and cause.

In addition to this aspect of the Dalai Lama's menace on Chinese sovereignty comes the issue that this religio-political leader is in effect a destabilizing factor to the Chinese Communist Party's politics of secularization. From the onset of the Chinese presence in Tibet, the Chinese Communist Party stated the "party adopts the policy of protecting religion. Whether you believe in religion or not [...] you will be respected" (MacInnis, 1972: 14). However, religious affairs are considered personal and should in no case

interfere with the political realm. It is here that the Dalai Lama is unfortunately incompatible as due to his dual status, it is impossible for him to secularise his religious duties from his political ones, this effectively puts him in a nonsensical twilight zone regarding the Communist Party's religious policy. When analysing the Dalai Lama's frequent statements, it is clear that he allows for consistent overlapping of political and religious issues. This is evident in his March 5 2010 statement where he elaborates "there is a serious problem in Tibet. As the world knows, this is evidenced by the fact that there is a huge military presence [...] it is good for neither party" (Gyatso, 2010). Further evidence of this mixture of politics and religion is seen in his 2011 March address when he continues to press "efforts to solve the issue of Tibet" (Gyatso, 2011). Although it is understandable that this absolutist leader is concerned for his people, his reckless transgression of the Chinese religious policy presents a potent threat to the sovereignty of the nation.

Adding to this, the Dalai Lama attempts subversion of Chinese sovereignty via his subliminal subterfuge in his political and media actions. Yet again, this leads me to a discourse analysis of his statements and appeals, which contain incriminating evidence of such manoeuvres. To begin with, the Dalai Lama tends to advise his supporters in which ways they must protest in order to efficiently cause maximum damage to the Chinese authorities. He openly advises: "Demonstrators must never take up arms even when fired upon with machine guns. Such an attitude will be much more difficult for Peking to control" (Donnet, 1994: 129). From this, it is possible to see that whilst he advocates unarmed protest, he does so in order to cause maximum difficulty for the Chinese government attempting to maintain its sovereignty. Adding to this tendency to provide

detrimental counsel, the Dalai Lama also regularly appeals for international action. His April 2 2008 appeal, which brought about immense international debate surrounding the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and the subsequent refusal of certain heads of states, namely Angela Merkel, to attend the opening ceremony, went very far in undermining Chinese sovereignty (Traynor, 2008). Furthermore, his call “to encourage the sending of an independent international body, to investigate the unrest and its underlying causes [...] [and to] exercise a restraining influence on the Chinese authorities” (Gyatso, 2008b), can be seen as a blatant and illegitimate attempt to put into question Chinese sovereignty. The ability for the Dalai Lama to encourage an “international body” to exercise a “restraining” mission against Chinese authority is dubious at best. Such an intervention would require the permission of the UN Security Council (United Nations, 1945). Considering that the UN recognizes China as a sovereign state, but not Tibet, it seems clear that he possesses little if any legitimacy to make such a call for intervention.

In conclusion, throughout this piece, I have examined evidence that indicates that the Dalai Lama is a true threat to China. This threat exists not only in the Tibetan region of the PRC but also extends itself as a global threat upon Chinese sovereignty. I began by studying the status of the Dalai Lama and what values and norms this religio-political actor embodies. Following this, I analysed in what ways the Dalai Lama acted as a menace to the Chinese political system active in Tibet. Here, I delved into two case studies, the first one being the 1987 Tibetan riots and the next the 2008 Tibetan social turmoil. These helped me better grasp the extent to which this figurehead truly unified segments of the Tibetan population and to what extent he commanded absolute power over their actions, which stands as a dangerous threat to the Chinese Communist Party.

Moreover, this linked with the first section, as I finally comprehended that the reason he threatened Chinese rule in Tibet was because he represented an ancient society that still managed to bestow its religious and political norms and values on its contemporary population. As my final section of analysis, I made a detailed scrutiny of the Dalai Lama's menace on Chinese sovereignty. This section looked into a variety of domains, namely threats to China's unity and the Communist Party's politics of secularisation. I also found it necessary to end with an analysis of the Dalai Lama's attempt to instil international doubt regarding China's sovereignty in his worldwide appeals and statements. From my work on this topic, I postulate that the Tibetan issue is a very controversial one, which cannot be simply resolved. However, the Chinese Communist Party and the Dalai Lama are bound to continue to clash due to the profound differences in the norms and values each party represents. On one side the Dalai Lama stands as a regional religio-political figurehead whilst the Communist Party embodies secularised values. Perhaps a pathway to peace would be for him to relinquish his place as a political actor of the system he promotes by officially stating his resignation from the Tibetan government-in-exile and ceasing his diplomatic travels alongside of his releasing of statements that only further exacerbate tensions. This would simultaneously trigger the process of creating a more secular Dalai Lama, which is an idea he is actually quite supportive of, and would take away a considerable amount of threat to the PRC.

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