



CHINA USES BUDDHISM FOR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

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The Foreign Affairs establishments of major nations usually include, among their practitioners of 'realpolitik', a select band of Sinologists, Kremlinologists, multi-lateral experts and the like. China's foreign affairs establishment appears to have a group of professionals specializing in *kasaya* (the garment worn by Buddhist monks and nuns) politics, or '*kasayapolitik*'! These experts are to be found mainly in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC)'s United Front Work Department (UFWD)—which has responsibility for the Party's interaction and relationship with China's ethnic minorities, non-communist party entities as well as Taiwan—and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A China-based Tibetan source claims that at least two members of the UFWD, who are autonomous in their functioning, are posted in the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi.

The CCP indicated official approval of Buddhism slightly over five years ago by describing it as an "ancient Chinese religion", and since then the Chinese communist authorities have sought to use it to achieve strategic and domestic objectives. A major step intended to appeal to the large number of Buddhists in China as well as portray to the neighbouring, predominantly Buddhist, countries that China's communist regime is tolerant of Buddhism, has been the decision to convene the World Buddhist Forums. It, additionally, projects China's 'soft power'.

Kok Kwong, Chairman of the Hongkong Buddhist Association, was one of eight persons who proposed that a World Buddhist Forum be held. Earlier, in 2004, Kok Kwong had urged Hongkong's Buddhists to be 'content with the Government' and not join anti-China protests. Others who 'initiated' the

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proposal included Yi Cheng, Chairman of the Buddhist Association of China till 2010, and Master Hsing Yun of Buddha's Light Association of Taiwan. The latter's support to China's venture has cost him the support of some Buddhist organizations in Taiwan.

China held the first World Buddhist Forum in Putuo Mountain in 2006, when the current Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping, tipped to take over as President from Hu Jintao in 2012 and at that time Party Secretary of Zhejiang province, mobilised resources for the convention. Beijing utilized this Forum, to which a large number of foreign monks, nuns and scholars were invited, to project the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama, Gyancaïn Norbu. The second World Buddhist Forum, which was held at Wuxi in 2009, had expanded objectives and held its concluding ceremony in Taiwan. This Forum continued the pattern of projecting to the Buddhist populace in China's neighbourhood the approval of the Chinese communist authorities to Buddhism. In addition to the China-appointed Panchen Lama Gyancaïn Norbu again attending the Forum, on this occasion Beijing emphasised that the Dalai Lama had not been invited to the Forum as he was a 'disruptive element'. A

third World Buddhist Forum is now planned to be held in Hongkong tentatively from April 25-30, 2012. It is likely that Gyancaïn Norbu will attend. Interestingly, two of the prominent foreign Buddhist personages who proposed the World Buddhist Forums are based in Taiwan and Hongkong, both territories claimed by China.

In the midst of these initiatives, China accelerated preparations for a post-Dalai

Lama phase and in 2007, promulgated regulations asserting that Beijing alone could accord final approval to the 'living Buddhas' and high lamas, including the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama. It simultaneously stepped up active interaction with other 'traditions' (or schools) of Tibetan Buddhism and high-ranking lamas, preferably those critical of the Dalai Lama. The Chinese authorities supported worshippers of the Shugden Diety, banned by the Dalai Lama and began disbursing extra subsidies to their monasteries. The sixtieth anniversary celebrations of the 'peaceful' liberation of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was used to invite Buddhist religious personages, including those based abroad, critical of the Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama has, meanwhile, been closely watching developments. After a three-day (22-24 Sept 2011) conclave with senior Tibetan Buddhist leaders in Dharamsala primarily to discuss the issue of his reincarnation, he issued an unusually tough 4,041-word statement at a special press conference on September

24. The statement criticized the Chinese authorities for manipulating Tibetan religious beliefs and practices for political ends. He described as "outrageous and disgraceful" the regulations promulgated by the Chinese in 2007, and said they were intended to enable

Beijing to assert control over the Tulkus. He contradicted Beijing's claims that it had accorded approval for recognition of high lamas, including the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, since the twelfth century and declared that only two of his predecessors were selected by drawing lots from the 'Golden Urn.' Asserting that "they are waiting for my death and will recognize a Fifteenth Dalai Lama of their choice," the Dalai Lama cautioned Tibetans to "bear in mind that, apart from the reincarnation recognized through such legitimate methods, no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People's Republic of China." Hinting that the struggle was not over, he assured "the main purpose of the appearance of a reincarnation is to continue the predecessor's unfinished work..."

The Dalai Lama used the occasion to also preempt the Chinese and demonstrate his spiritual authority. He accorded official recognition to the Jonang, after hundreds of years, as a fifth and legitimate 'tradition' of Tibetan Buddhism. It is an interesting coincidence that the largest number of Jonang monasteries are located in Ngaba,

Sichuan province, very close to Kirti Monastery, which has emerged as a veritable centre of anti-Chinese protests.

Beijing similarly began cultivating the Karma Kagyu 'tradition' of Tibetan Buddhism which, as one of the oldest 'traditions', exercises considerable influence in large areas of Tibet and the mountainous Indo-Himalayan border belt. A large number of the Buddhists in Ladakh are followers of this 'tradition' as are the majority of those resident in Sikkim and Bhutan.

The Karma Kagyu is presently riven with dissension with at least four claimants to the position of the XVIIth Gyalwa Karmapa, who heads the 'tradition'. Ughyen Thinley Dorje, who has been recognized as the XVIIth Gyalwa Karmapa by the Dalai Lama and Beijing, escaped from Tsurphu monastery near Lhasa into India in 2000, and resides in Dharamsala. While suspicions about the manner of his escape continue to linger, an interesting new disclosure

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was recently made by a Hongkong-based source. The source, who claims first-hand knowledge of the incident, states that the day after Ughyen Thinley Dorje's escape, a prominent Hongkong-based businessman and interlocutor with Beijing, TC Wu, received an urgent summons to reach Beijing the same

day for a meeting with the State Council. While there, TC Wu, acting on instructions, placed a call to a confidante in Hongkong to ascertain whether Ughyen Thinley Dorje had escaped to India. After checking from reliable sources, including the Dalai Lama's legal counsel Michael Van Waalt, the confidante called the given telephone number of the State Council in Beijing and confirmed that Ughyen Thinley Dorje had escaped and was in India.

In this backdrop, the visit this February to Hongkong by Thaye Thinley Dorje, a major rival to the position of XVIIth Gyalwa Karmapa, as also the large convention organized by the Hongkong Buddhist Association in mid-October to felicitate 900 years of the Karma Kagyu 'tradition', assume significance. Neither could have been organized in Hongkong without Beijing's approval.

Earlier in mid-September, all the English and Chinese language newspapers in Hong Kong commenced publicising an upcoming 'Hong Kong & Macau Karmapa 900 Years Celebration' at the HK Convention and Exhibition Centre from October 7-9, 2011, with an extra day in Macau. Several thousand people attended, including some officials from Beijing. Interestingly, the guest of

honor was the 9th Khenchen Thrangu Rimpoche, the Regent of Rumtek Monastery who sided against Shamar Rinpoche and recognizes Ughyen Thinley Dorje. The latter was invited but did not attend. A number of senior Tibetan lamas traveled to Hong Kong from India and other international capitals to attend the event.

Such a large convention attended by high-ranking Tibetan Buddhist lamas could not have been organized in Hongkong without the approval of Beijing and the UFWD. It strongly suggests that the UFWD has made inroads into the Karma Kagyu 'tradition' and is attempting to woo Thaye Thinley Dorje. The presence of the 9th Khenchen Thrangu Rimpoche, the Regent of Rumtek Monastery who is opposed to Shamar Rinpoche, suggests he could be the subject of Beijing's blandishments. The UFWD's objective would be to either prevent Ughyen Thinley Dorje from ascending the throne in Rumtek Monastery near Gangtok in Sikkim, or to exercise control over the influential Karma Kagyu 'tradition' of Tibetan Buddhism. At the least its objective would be to ensure a schism among followers of the Karma Kagyu 'tradition'.

Certain administrative measures have also been taken by the authorities in recent months to tackle the restive TAR and Tibetan areas. In addition to investing large sums of capital in developmental projects and announcing (Tibet Daily, Nov 23, 2011) pensions for monks, a couple of high-level personnel changes have been effected. More are likely to follow. Lobsang Gyaltzen, ranked tenth in the TAR Party hierarchy, handed over the post of Director of the TAR United Front Work Department to Chodak, another Tibetan cadre with long experience of dealing with senior personages among the Shugden Diety worshippers. Lobsang Gyaltzen continues in TAR possibly awaiting an elevation. Another ethnic Tibetan cadre, Che Delha, replaced a Han cadre as Party Secretary of Lhasa Municipality in November 2011.

Zhang Qingli, a reputed hardliner credited with the statement in March 2008 that "the Dalai Lama is a wolf in monk's robes, a devil with a human

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face but the heart of a beast" and who was TAR Party Secretary since 2005, was transferred out in August 2011. He was replaced by Chen Quanguo, who could be planning to strengthen the emphasis on development work. Chen Quanguo was born in 1955 and has a Master's Degree in Economics. Interestingly, a remark by Zhang Jinan, the Vice Minister of the CCP

CC's powerful Organisation Department who had specially flown in from Beijing and convened a large meeting of TAR officials in Lhasa on 25 August 2011, to introduce Chen Quanguo, hinted that personnel of the Region's security establishment possibly had reservations about the change-over. While introducing Chen Quanguo, the CCP CC Organisation Department Vice Minister, Zhang Jinan, pointedly disclosed that Chen Quanguo had once served in the PLA. Notably, the official CCP biography of Chen Quanguo made no mention of such service!

Zhang Qingli's transfer is most likely a prelude to his promotion. Born in 1951, Zhang Qingli is in the right age bracket and a CCP Central Committee member. Added to that is his unique work experience of having managed tough assignments in Tibet since 2005 and for three years prior to that in Xinjiang. He is presently acting Party Secretary of Hebei, which has a large number of Christians, since November 2011. Favouring Zhang Qingli is the fact that he is a nephew of General Zhang Wannian, a former Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and a 'princeling'. Also, he has worked with Hu Jintao and for seven years with Security Czar and PBSC member Zhou Yongkang. His work in Tibet has

been praised by Xi Jinping. He is a potential candidate for elevation to the CCP CC Politburo where he can be expected to have an important input in affairs relating to Tibet, Xinjiang and China's minorities.

In the interregnum, tension in the TAR and Tibetan regions inside China continues to be high. Monks and nuns mainly spearhead resistance to the Chinese. The twelve unprecedented instances of self-immolation, by formerly ordained monks and nuns reported so far in Tibetan areas of China,

have heightened tension. All those who committed self-immolation are under thirty years of age with the majority being under twenty. Beijing has not yet fashioned a response to these incidents or to the Dalai Lama's September statement on his reincarnation. There has also been no indication of a move to resume the dialogue between Beijing and the Dalai Lama's envoys, though these have remained suspended now for the longest period.

Instead, and prompted more by developments in Indo-US relations and the Asia Pacific region, Beijing tried to further circumscribe the Dalai Lama's activities in India. In the process it intruded on India's sovereignty and values. More such pressure can be expected. The major leadership changes anticipated at the Eighteenth Party Congress scheduled in October 2012, could have slowed down Beijing's response, but any change in Beijing's policy towards Tibet even after the new leadership takes over is unlikely.



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