



2011-020

**The Great Game and Tibet.**
**Essay by Jiu-Hwa Lo Upshur, Eastern Michigan University (jupshur@emich.edu).**

## Historical Background

Central Eurasia—loosely defined as the space that stretches from Ukraine in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east and from Siberia in the north to Tibet in the south—was in ancient times mostly a vast, unmapped land between the Roman and Chinese empires. In the early modern era, part of it lay between the Russian Empire under the Romanov dynasty (1603–1917) and the Chinese Empire under the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, China and Russia clashed in Far East boundary disputes eventually settled by negotiated treaties. Great Britain became a player in Central Eurasia in the nineteenth century as it expanded its control over the Indian subcontinent and pursued global imperial ambitions. Its focus on Central Eurasia stemmed from fear of the expansion of the Russian empire toward British India and from suspicion of Russian ambitions generally in the Indian subcontinent. Britain’s role in the region essentially ended after World War II, when British India became two independent states, India and Pakistan.

China’s position throughout Central Eurasia suffered dramatic reversals from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, as the Qing dynasty declined, fell, and was succeeded by weak republican governments. China’s northern borderlands became the prize sought after by Russia, Britain, and Japan. Chinese power revived after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 when the new government began reasserting Chinese authority over its borderlands, including Tibet. As the United States became the leader of the anti-communist world during the Cold War, it succeeded Britain in confronting the Soviet Union (successor of imperial Russia) and its ally, the PRC, across Central Eurasia. Just as Britain had feared Russian influence over Tibet would threaten its Indian Empire, the United States later felt China’s dominance of Tibet might lead to further Chinese expansion throughout the region. Seeking to contain communist power throughout the world, the United States thus became a protagonist in the struggle over the future of Tibet.

Though an intelligence officer of the British East India Company’s Sixth Bengal Light Cavalry, Arthur Conolly (1807–42), coined the term “Great Game,” Rudyard Kipling made it familiar to the wider public in his popular novel *Kim* (1901),<sup>1</sup> set against the background of the contest between Britain and Russia for control of lands along India’s northwest border and across Eurasia. Russian expansion across Central Asia was so dramatic that the thousands of miles separating the two empires at the beginning of the nineteenth century had shrunk to a mere twenty miles over the Pamir Mountains by its end. No wonder Russophobia was so rife in London and Calcutta (capital of British India before New Delhi).

Although Tibet was never the centerpiece of the major powers’ imperial ambitions during these centuries, it nevertheless became embroiled in their rivalries. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, China gained control over Tibet to deny its enemy the Zunghars refuge in that mountainous region. During the nineteenth century, the British, anxious about Russian designs on India, waged wars to secure Afghanistan as a friendly buffer state and took steps to control Tibet or at least prevent the Russians from doing so. After 1949, the United States unsuccessfully mounted covert operations to bolster Tibetan resistance against China.

This essay briefly traces the course of the Great Game, with special focus on Tibet. I have drawn on several recent books based on newly declassified material by or about people who played some role in executing American policy concerning Tibet.

1. Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (NY: Kodansha, 1994) 1.

## China Ascendant

The first phase of the Great Game involved China, Russia, and Zungharia (present-day western Mongolia) over roughly a century. Although not central to the struggle, Tibet became involved. In the mid-seventeenth century, the advancing forces of the Russian Empire, spearheaded by the Cossacks, crossed Siberia and reached the northern Pacific coast after subduing lands sparsely populated by primitive peoples. There they confronted frontier forces of the newly established Qing dynasty in several minor clashes. This forced the two empires to define their boundaries. The great menace to frontier peace for the Qing government was not, however, Russia but the warlike Zunghar tribesmen, Mongols by ethnicity and Buddhists of the Tibetan persuasion by religion. Three powerful Qing emperors (Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong) conducted arduous campaigns across formidable deserts and mountains to destroy the Zunghar state and ethnic identity.<sup>2</sup> New groups of people, including the Mongol Oirats, also Buddhist, who chose to repatriate from the Volga River area of Russia, repopulated the region. By the Treaties of Nerchinsk (1689) and Kaichika (1727), Russia and China defined their borders across some three thousand miles, regulated trade, and provided for extradition of criminals and fugitives to deprive Zunghars any places of refuge. When its last ruler died, Zungharia ceased to exist and China annexed its former territory.

A significant byproduct of the nearly century-long war against the Zunghars was China's firm control over Tibet. Zunghars, like other eastern Mongols, having converted to the Tibetan branch of Buddhism, followed the Dalai Lama and other incarnate lamas as their spiritual leaders. Suspecting collusion between the Zunghars and Tibetan clerical leaders and the possibility that defeated Zunghars would find refuge in Tibet, the three great Qing rulers first secured Qinghai, which offered access to Tibet across southwestern China, eliminating another escape route for the Zunghars and cutting off any aid they might receive from their Tibetan coreligionists. Subsequent Qing measures in Tibet ended the Mongol chieftains' influence in selecting the top Tibetan lamas, removed an anti-Qing Dalai Lama, and established the (rarely invoked) Qing prerogative to select the top lamas (Dalai and Panchen). Qing policy toward Tibet combined coercion and conciliation: after securing their obedience, the imperial government mollified the top Tibetan clerics by showering them with subsidies, lavish gifts, and exalted spiritual titles. Both the Dalai and Panchen Lamas were received as honored guests in Beijing and at the emperors' summer capital, Zhengde, where Tibetan-style temples, including a scaled-down Potala (Dalai Lama's palace-temple complex in Lhasa), were built and maintained.

Successive Qing rulers proclaimed themselves patrons of Tibetan Buddhism both to conciliate Tibetans (and Mongolians) and to solidify their control over distant and potentially troublesome borderlands. While the Qing rulers honored the high lamas, they did not change their status as political subordinates; the Tibetans, however, regarded the respect shown for the lamas as indicating that they were spiritual patrons of the monarchs. This discrepancy led to arguments as to whether China had *sovereign* or *suzerain* control over Tibet, or none at all. Machtpolitik would ultimately decide the issue.

On completing the Zungharian wars, Emperor Qianlong erected huge stone stelae to document his dynasty's accomplishments in four languages—Chinese, Manchu (the native language of the dynastic rulers), Mongolian, and Tibetan—signifying the ethnically diverse nature of the empire. In the same vein, Qing rulers sanctioned official reverence of Confucius (maintaining his tomb and continuing to confer the rank of duke on his descendants), Taoist leaders, the Dalai Lama, and other worthies. Qing power in Tibet reached its zenith in 1792, when the Gurkha soldiers of Nepal invaded Tibet in a local dispute and occupied Lhasa. Qianlong responded by mobilizing seventeen thousand soldiers plus support personnel. By a two-pronged forced march during winter, the Chinese army defeated the Nepalese and pursued them to within twenty miles of their capital, Katmandu. After surrendering in 1793, Nepal returned the treasures it had looted from Lhasa and agreed to send tribute to Beijing every five years as a sign of submission and vassalage. Qianlong

---

2. For details, see Peter Perdue's authoritative *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2005) with my review at *MiWSR* 2009.11.05. Nomadic states generally had small populations; Perdue estimates the number of Zunghars at about 600,000. In addition to those killed in warfare, many died from smallpox, while some were absorbed by other tribes.

counted this tour de force as the last of the ten victorious campaigns (officially, the “Ten Perfections”) of his reign. It marked the apex of Qing power over Tibet. The amban or Chinese resident-general in Lhasa received enhanced powers, including supervision of the selection of future Dalai and Panchen Lamas (the first and second spiritual leaders of Tibet). They also wielded political power from Lhasa and Tashilumpo, the two leading lamas’ principal cities. Significantly, these steps to integrate Tibet into the Chinese empire later buttressed China’s claim of sovereignty there.

While the Qing army was chasing the Gurkhas to Katmandu, British ambassador Lord Macartney was arriving in Beijing to (so the Chinese thought) congratulate the emperor on his eightieth birthday. The British diplomat presciently compared the Chinese empire with an ancient man-of-war, impressive on the exterior but rotten within. Qianlong abdicated two years later to avoid exceeding the sixty-one-year reign of his revered grandfather. The loss of control over Tibet was one symbol of the dynasty’s catastrophic decline during the nineteenth century.

### Anglo-Russian Rivalry: The Great Game

During most of the nineteenth century, the Anglo-Russian Great Game in Eurasia dominated events in most of the region and preoccupied diplomats in London and St. Petersburg. While rapid expansion was making Russia the largest contiguous land empire, Britain was the dominant maritime and global colonial power. The British East India Company, founded in the early seventeenth century (initially as the English East India Company) was no longer just a trading enterprise but ruled large tracts of territory across India either directly or indirectly through native rulers, replacing the increasingly impotent Moghul Dynasty. From the mid-eighteenth through the early twentieth century, the British intensified their domination of India, defining its borders and securing them against foreign incursions by creating buffer states.

Although British commerce led the world during the eighteenth century, Qing China restricted Western traders to the single major port of Canton (Guangzhou) on the southern coast and severely limited their activities. The British East India Company’s monopoly of Britain’s commerce with China caused an acute trade imbalance—far greater importation (mostly of tea) from China than exportation to it. To remedy this, the company’s chief officer, the Governor-General of Bengal, sought to bypass Canton and ramp up trade to China by an alternate route. In 1774, Governor-General Warren Hastings entrusted a resourceful young Company officer, George Bogle, to travel to Tibet and open up commercial opportunities there and, through it, with the rest of China. The pretext for the mission was a letter Hastings received from the Panchen Lama seeking open relations with the British authorities in India. The Panchen Lama wanted to exploit the fact that the Dalai Lama was then a minor under an unpopular regent and to counter the power of the amban.

Bogle, carrying an official letter and gifts to the Panchen Lama (also called the Tashi Lama after his main monastic center in Tashilumpo), was the first Englishman to enter Tibet. He was a perceptive observer and his detailed journal gave the Western world the first full account of the mysterious land of Tibet (and the basis for the later tale of Shangri-la). But the mission achieved little in the face of Tibet’s complex political situation, forbidding transport problems, and lack of valuable exports. Under the circumstances, the limited traditional trading pattern between Tibet and India had to suffice.

While Bogle was in Tibet, the Panchen Lama received an invitation to visit Zhengde and Beijing to participate in celebrating Emperor Qianlong’s seventieth birthday. Bogle asked him to speak favorably to the emperor about trade between China and India via the Tibetan route. He then set off on his return journey to India. It does not seem that any conversation between the Lama and Qianlong on Anglo-Chinese trade via Tibet ever took place. After an extremely slow journey to Beijing, the Panchen Lama was stricken with smallpox and died, having ignored the urging of Chinese officials in charge of his arrangements that he be inoculated against the disease.<sup>3</sup> In the end, British victories in the mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-Chinese

---

3. See Kate Teltscher, *The High Road to China: George Bogle, the Panchen Lama, and the First British Expedition to Tibet* (NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006) 211, 224–26. Smallpox was a dreaded disease in China up to the eighteenth century, when a vaccination

Wars resolved the trading issues between the two countries in Britain's favor and the opening of a route via Tibet ceased to be of interest.

Peter Hopkirk has written of the Great Game that "The vast chessboard on which this shadowy struggle for political ascendancy took place stretched from the snow-capped Caucasus in the west, across the great desert and mountain ranges of Central Asia, to Chinese Turkestan and Tibet in the east. The ultimate prize, or so it was feared in London and Calcutta, and fervently hoped by ambitious Russian officers serving in Asia, was British India."<sup>4</sup> On a visit to London in 1844, Tsar Nicholas I had promised the British government that the khanates of Bokhara, Khiva, and Samarkand would remain independent neutral zones between the two empires. But each of the khanates, plus others, fell under Russian control in rapid succession and, in 1867, were consolidated into a province—Russian Turkestan, a mere twenty miles from India across the Pamir Mountains in Afghanistan.

The alarmed British authorities reacted by extending and consolidating their control in the northwestern regions of the subcontinent and attempting to secure a pro-British government in Afghanistan. Fearing that the Afghan emir was pro-Russian, the British sent an expedition to Kabul and ousted him in the First Afghan War (1839–42). But, in 1844, the Afghans revolted against his British replacement and slaughtered the entire British occupation army. Afghanistan became a pawn in the Anglo-Russian rivalry and its chaotic internal politics drew Britain into a Second Afghan War (1878–80). The new ruler that the British placed on the Afghan throne then signed a treaty with Britain, accepting a subsidy in return for ceding control of Afghanistan's foreign policy to the Government of India. An Afghan Boundary Commission headed by British officer Sir Mortimer Durand later established the border between Afghanistan and India—the "Durand Line." In 1895, another boundary commission fixed the Afghan-Russian border from the Oxus River to the Zulfikar Pass and along the Pamirs. These measures ended a phase of Anglo-Russian competition and dampened Russophobia in Britain and British India.

Was British fear of Russian designs on India justified? Was a Russian invasion through Afghanistan possible? And, could Russia have penetrated India via Tibet? None of these questions can be definitively answered, but, as Chinese influence in Tibet waned in the late nineteenth century, Tibetan leaders made policy moves that alarmed the British. In 1890, the Dalai Lama, on reaching majority, with the help of his Buriat Mongol tutor, Dorjief,<sup>5</sup> staged a coup that overthrew his regent. Because each Dalai, Panchen, and other important lama in Tibetan Buddhism is believed to be the incarnation of the previous one, the search for a successor could not begin until the predecessor's death. Because the successor had to be a boy (not necessarily born immediately after the previous incarnation's death), long regencies under powerful and ambitious men were common. Coups and wars occurred regularly to overthrow regents reluctant to step down after their wards reached adulthood. Dorjief led Tibetan missions to Russia in 1898, 1900, and 1901, and the British suspected he had negotiated treaties there on behalf of his Tibetan pupil, though Russia denied this. Britain nevertheless continued to believe other Buriat Mongols monks in Lhasa were in fact Russian agents.

Apprehensive about Russian intrigue in Tibet and a possible Russian incursion from there into India, British viceroy Lord Curzon wrote to the Dalai Lama in 1902 for clarification. When his letter was returned unopened, he sent a mission in May 1903 to Lhasa led by Francis Younghusband, a resourceful and experienced army officer, accompanied by a hundred troops. They were, however, denied entry into Tibet and returned empty-handed. Curzon thereupon promoted Younghusband to colonel of the army with diplomatic rank of Commissioner and dispatched him to Lhasa with a thousand troops, ten thousand coolies (servants and porters), seven thousand mules, and four hundred yaks to haul provisions. This time, he ignored the Tibetan border officials, who once again refused him entry. In response, Tibetan soldiers, armed with

---

derived from infected cows reduced its ravages among the Han Chinese. Its toll, however, remained high among the peoples of the borderlands, including, as noted above, the Zunghars.

4. Hopkirk, *Great Game*, 2.

5. Dorjief, like all Buriat Mongols, was also a Russian subject.

swords, antique matchlocks, and charms from Dalai (to make them invulnerable to enemy fire), attacked the British forces. Within minutes, the merciless firepower of twentieth-century weapons obliterated this quaint, medieval army. A British officer reported that “[The Tibetans] were bewildered. The impossible had happened. Prayers and charms and mantras, and the holiest of their holy men had failed them.”<sup>6</sup> The British army reached Lhasa only to find that the Dalai Lama had fled with Dorjief to Urga (present-day Ulan Bator in Mongolia), leaving the regent behind with his seal of office.

Younghusband found no Russian lamas or other evidence of Russian machinations in Lhasa. The Chinese amban, in no position to oust the British, obligingly stripped Dalai of his temporal powers. Several weeks later, the regent affixed Dalai’s seal to the Anglo-Tibetan Convention. The amban, however, did not apply China’s seal because he lacked the authority to do so. The Convention reaffirmed the previously fixed border between Tibet and British protectorate Sikkim, opened up two more Tibetan outposts for trade with India, and assessed an indemnity that Tibet had to pay Britain. Finally, Tibet agreed not to negotiate with foreign powers (China was not included, since Tibet was part of the Chinese empire) without British consent. The British party then left Lhasa for India. The expedition had strung a telegraph line along its route into Tibet, linking Lhasa to India. The Tibetans, told the line had been put in place to guide the British retreat, did not sabotage it. Britain later reduced the Tibetan indemnity and modified other onerous conditions.<sup>7</sup>

Russia, having sustained severe setbacks in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), reached a wide-ranging agreement with Britain (the Anglo-Russian Convention) in 1907. The signatories agreed to make Tibet a neutral zone and to refer any issues concerning it to the Chinese. The Convention ended a century of British anxiety over Russian goals in the region. It also confirmed the 1890 Anglo-Chinese Convention on the Tibet-Sikkim boundary and trade agreement, by which Britain consented not to annex Tibet or interfere in its internal administration, and the Chinese not to allow other powers to meddle in Tibet’s domestic affairs or compromise its territorial integrity. Britain and Russia had effectively agreed to make Tibet (like Afghanistan) a buffer zone between their empires.

It remained only for Britain to define the border between Tibet and India. Meanwhile, a revolution in China (1911) replaced the Qing dynasty with a republic that endured civil wars and unstable governments for the next two decades. In 1913, British authorities in India convened a meeting at its summer capital (the Simla Conference) with two goals in mind: first, to induce China to recognize the division of Tibet into two zones, the eastern part (Inner Tibet) comprising portions of the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Sikang, and Yunnan, and the western (Outer Tibet) adjoining India. Britain would recognize Chinese suzerainty over both regions but concede any administrative rights over Outer Tibet. Britain wished to keep Chinese authority from reaching the borders of India. It also wanted China to recognize Tibet’s boundary with India, as drawn by Sir Henry McMahon, who had earlier assisted in creating the Durand Line between India and Afghanistan. McMahon advantaged India by pushing the previous border “northward by about sixty miles, lifting it from the strategically exposed foot of the hills to the crest line of the Assam Himalayas ... [thereby doing] for British India in the north-east what Durand had attempted twenty years before on the Afghan frontier, bringing a mostly tribal no-man’s land under nominal British sovereignty.”<sup>8</sup> Despite its weak hand, China refused to sign either document and repudiated the convention and the British boundary plans. Although Britain obtained a favorable boundary with Tibet/China, it did not station troops near the demarcation line since China was weak and unthreatening.

#### The United States’ Interest in Tibet

The United States government had shown no interest in Tibet before its World War II alliance with China, Japan’s first victim. After attacking China in 1937, Japan’s superior forces had rapidly seized control of Chi-

6. Peter Hopkirk, *Trespassers on the Roof of the World: The Secret Exploration of Tibet* (NY: Kodansha, 1982) 175.

7. *Ibid.*, 160–94—a succinct account of the expedition.

8. Neville Maxwell, *India’s China War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972) 41.

na's coast line. China initially used the land route from French Indochina to obtain supplies from abroad. When Vichy France acceded to Japan's demand to close that route (Japan being Nazi Germany's ally), China built a road through British controlled Burma (the Burma Road). Soon after declaring war against Britain in 1941, Japan had seized control of Burma, forcing China to consider building a road across a corner of Tibet to obtain supplies from India, but the Tibetan authorities refused to give permission.

The United States became interested in exploring the Tibetan route as a means of supplying its ally China. The US Office of Strategic Services (OSS) sent a "reconnaissance" mission to Tibet and selected Cpt. Ilya Tolstoy and Lt. Brooke Dolan II to assess the situation. They set out from Washington in July 1942 and arrived at Lhasa via India late in December. They met with the eight-year-old Dalai Lama and gave him a letter and signed photograph from President Franklin Roosevelt, and a gold Patek Philippe watch; they also held conversations with his advisors. Their assessment was that a road through Tibet was impracticable.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the United States would fly Lend-Lease supplies to China from India over the Himalaya Mountains (called "The Hump") to Kunming in Yunnan province in southwestern China. One night in December 1943, a converted B-24 bomber commanded by Lt. Robert Crozier was returning from Kunming to India. A fierce storm blew his plane off course over the Himalayas. He lost radio contact and ran out of fuel, but he and his crew parachuted before the plane crashed. The astonished locals brought the American airmen to nearby Lhasa where they were met by a mob furious that they had dared fly above the Dalai Lama in his Potala palace. Luckily the Chinese and British Missions in Lhasa intervened and the men were escorted out of Tibet to India, the local Tibetans happy to think the gods had punished the Americans for their impunity by causing their plane to crash.<sup>10</sup>

Tibet reignited American interest in 1949 as the Chinese communists were defeating the Nationalists in the final phase of their civil war. These events forced Tibet out of its isolation to seek outside support. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sent an agent, Douglas Mackiernan, into Tibet in late 1949 to glean a clearer understanding of the situation there. His traveling companion and compatriot, anthropologist Frank Bessac (1922–2010), recounted the trip in his book *Death on the Chang Tang, Tibet, 1950*.<sup>11</sup> Bessac, who had been drafted during World War II and given Chinese language training, was working for the OSS in China at the end of the war. He then left government service and, on a Fulbright scholarship, arrived in Tihua, capital of Xinjiang province (present Urumqi) late in 1949, just as the local garrison had changed sides in the civil war and delivered the city to the Communists. All US consulate personnel had evacuated except vice-consul Mackiernan, who offered Bessac a chance to get out by joining his party, together with three White Russians who spoke the languages of some nomadic tribes in the region, and local guides. Bessac believed Mackiernan's duties in Tihua had included monitoring local uranium mines and Soviet nuclear activities in nearby Kazakhstan. The journey by jeep and then ponies and yaks over treacherous natural terrain and lawless lands in severe weather tested Mackiernan's considerable abilities. He had a shortwave radio and sent daily messages by Morse code. Bessac knew neither the precise nature of the mission nor the content of the messages, since he had refused Mackiernan's offer to work for the CIA. As the unarmed American party (unfortunately, dressed as Kazakhs, traditional enemies of the Tibetans) neared Lhasa, a Tibetan militia team began firing at them despite their raised hands and offer of gifts,<sup>12</sup> killing Mackiernan<sup>13</sup>

---

9. Thomas Laird, *The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama* (NY: Grove, 2006) 291–93, and John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival* (NY: Public Affairs, 1999) 5–10.

10. Hopkirk, *Trepassers*, 237–45, based on Crozier's account.

11. Frank B. Bessac and Susanne L. Bessac, with Joan Orielle Bessac Steelquist, *Death on the Chang Tang, Tibet, 1950: The Education of an Anthropologist* (Missoula: U Montana Printing & Graphic Services, 2006).

12. Bessac wondered why the militia would do this in light of Mackiernan's shortwave reports to the State Department, which should have kept the Tibetan government, then seeking US military aid, informed about their progress. He conjectured that the incident had taken place in an area influenced or controlled by the Panchen Lama. See *Death on the Chang Tang*, 104–11. Thomas Laird, *Into Tibet: The CIA's First Atomic Spy and his Secret Expedition to Lhasa* (NY: Grove, 2002) 206, says Bessac was a "contract agent" of the CIA. If so, why didn't he know how to use Mackiernan's radio to establish contact with headquarters after the latter's murder?

13. *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Douglas Seymour Mackiernan": "Because he was the first CIA officer operating under diplomatic cover as a State Department employee to be killed, the CIA had not yet established procedures about pensions; ultimately his wife and children

and three locals in his party, and wounding two of the White Russians. Bessac escaped injury. The militiamen cut off the dead men's heads to bring back as evidence, left the bodies to the vultures, looted the victims' belongings, and took the survivors captive. The US government had notified the Lhasa authorities of the Americans' arrival, but for some reason word did not reach the militiamen in time.

Another team from Lhasa arrived and freed the captives; its leader offered Bessac his pistol to execute the militia leader, which he refused to do. In Lhasa, the Tibetan authorities sentenced the miscreants to having their noses cut off and eyes gouged out, but, at Bessac's intercession, they were instead only flogged and released. In Lhasa, Bessac was able, courtesy of the British Mission, to report Mackiernan's death back to the States. The Tibetan leaders questioned him about American policy regarding China's avowed intention to take control over Tibet, but, of course, he could give no answer. He was then given a letter to deliver to the US Secretary of State (which he eventually did) and was escorted with the White Russians to Tibet's border with India.<sup>14</sup> In Calcutta, he was questioned by the US vice-consul Frederick Latrash, the CIA agent working in the consulate.<sup>15</sup> Mackiernan's tragic end shows the difficulties outsiders faced when dealing with or trying to help the Tibetans.

In December 1949, the Tibetan government wrote to President Harry Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson requesting aid. The United States then sought Indian help in contacting Tibet, but received a cool response. India did, however, promise Dalai asylum if needed. Transporting military aid to Tibet posed formidable problems. A British military authority estimated it would have required seven thousand mules to deliver across the Himalayas the guns and ammunition to supply a brigade for six months. Nor did the outside world understand the complex situation in Tibet—the fluctuating loyalties among tribes and clans, the links between monasteries and secular authorities, and Lhasa's relations with the hinterland. Mackiernan's fate was an instructive case in point. In the words of a CIA officer who had dealt with Tibetans for many years: “The painful irony is that he was killed by the very same people whose leaders were seeking help from Washington against the Communists.”<sup>16</sup>

In early 1950, China initiated measures to bring the Tibetan region under its control. What precisely constituted “Tibet” was unclear. According to the 1990 Chinese census, 46 percent of ethnic Tibetans lived within political Tibet, whose regional borders Qing emperor Yungzheng had established in 1727—the present-day Tibetan Autonomous Region of China. The remaining 54 percent, some nomads, others sedentary, lived east of the Yangzi River's headwaters in areas the Tibetans called Khampa, Golok, and Amdo in four provinces—Sikang, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan—and in Gansu province, intermixed with Han, Mongol, and other ethnic groups. While the Tibetans in the borderlands acknowledge the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader, they speak their own dialects, and have their own clan, monastic, and feudal leaders with various, ill-defined relationships with Lhasa.<sup>17</sup>

Units of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) began to move into the Tibetan borderlands in early 1950, to build or improve roads and bridges, establish bases, and accustom the men to high altitudes. That fall, the PLA moved into Khampa, took the chief administrative town Chamdo, and captured its governor Ngabo Jigme Norbu, encountering little resistance. In Beijing, Ngabo signed a Seventeen Point (or Article) Agreement placing Tibet under Chinese control.<sup>18</sup> Panic had seized Lhasa at the news of the fall of

---

were denied a CIA pension. In 1950, Peggy Mackiernan was awarded a small pension by the State Department, much smaller than her pension would have been if she had received the CIA pension that was due to her. It was only in 2000, that the first star on the CIA's Wall of Honor was acknowledged to belong to Mackiernan in a secret memorial ceremony with Mackiernan's wife and family present at the CIA's Langley, Virginia, headquarters. When Mackiernan's atomic intelligence work was revealed by a journalist in 2002, it was disputed by CIA employees; however, in 2006, his name was listed in the CIA's Book of Honor and in 2008 his employment by the CIA and his work in atomic intelligence was officially and publicly acknowledged by CIA Director Michael Hayden.”

14. Bessac, *Death on the Chang Tang*, 49–131.

15. Laird, *Into Tibet*, 206.

16. Knaus, *Orphans*, 50–54, 61.

17. *Ibid.*, 69–70.

18. Mikel Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors: The Story of the CIA-Backed Tibetan Freedom Fighters, the Chinese Invasion, and the Ultimate Fall of Tibet* (NY: Tarcher/Penguin, 2004) 56–79, 102–8.

Khampa and capture of Ngabo. The government responded in several ways: it ended the regency and granted governing authority to the sixteen-year-old Dalai rather than wait until he turned eighteen according to tradition. It also sought international help by appealing to the United Nations, but the United States, Britain, and India refused to sponsor a motion to debate, leaving El Salvador as sole sponsor; the motion was tabled due to the urgency of dealing with the Korean War.<sup>19</sup>

On the advice of one of his elder brothers, an abbot of a monastery at Amdo, Dalai and his supporters secretly fled Lhasa on 20 December 1950, heading for Yatung, a small town near the Indian border. There Dalai was contacted by the US embassy in New Delhi with an offer of assistance. President Truman acted out of humanitarian concerns and the need to take a hard-line stance against China to counter specious Republican claims that he was soft on communism. The United States advised Dalai to seek asylum in an Asian country and suggested Ceylon, Thailand, or India, but offered to take him if there were no alternatives, as “a religious leader of an autonomous state” and contingent on his repudiating the Seventeen Article Agreement that Ngabo had signed. The American ambassador to India, Loy Henderson, even contacted Austrian mountain climber Heinrich Harrer,<sup>20</sup> then in India after fleeing Tibet in 1949 ahead of the PLA, to assist with an escape plan for the Dalai through Bhutan into India.<sup>21</sup> On the advice of the two Tibetan State Oracles, Dalai returned to Lhasa on 16 September 1951.<sup>22</sup> According to John Knaus, a CIA operations officer who dealt with Tibet, “Four decades later [then assistant Secretary of State] Dean Rusk ruefully recalled that this intervention from the gods overruled assurances by the most powerful country on Earth.”<sup>23</sup> By the time he reached Lhasa, after an eight-month absence, so had a large contingent of the PLA.

A honeymoon period between the Tibetan and Chinese authorities followed. The Dalai Lama accepted the Seventeen Article Agreement and began to institute some changes of his own in Tibet, hoping to preempt Chinese-initiated reforms. He abandoned the effort, however, because of opposition from Tibetan aristocrats. Dalai also refused the offer of Ambassador Chester Bowles in New Delhi to help him escape Tibet in a plane that would land on frozen lakes near Lhasa. During 1954–55, the Dalai and Panchen Lamas spent seven months in Beijing, where they met with Mao Zedong and other top Chinese Communist Party leaders.<sup>24</sup>

In 1956, Dalai was permitted to visit India for the 2,500th anniversary of Gautama Buddha’s birth, a case of China trying to present a benign face in handling restlessness in Tibet, in contrast to the hard-line Soviet suppression of revolt in Hungary and unrest in Poland that same year. While in India, Dalai met with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. But Nehru had already acknowledged Chinese sovereignty in Tibet by downgrading the Indian Mission in Lhasa to consulate-general in 1952 and signing a Sino-Indian Agreement in 1954 closing the Indian military post in Lhasa where Tibetan soldiers trained.<sup>25</sup> Nor did Nehru indicate whether he would grant refuge to Dalai. After the ceremonies, Dalai visited the Tibetan refugees in Kalim-

19. Knaus, *Orphans*, 70–74.

20. Born in Austria, Harrer, a member of the Nazi Party and the SS, was chosen in 1939 to join an Austrian-German mountaineer team planning to travel to Kashmir, India, to climb Nanga Parbar in the Himalayas. Nazi ideologue and Reichsführer-SS, Heinrich Himmler, had an interest in Tibet because of a myth that Aryans had once upon a time taken refuge and retained their racial purity in that secluded land. Himmler also thought Harrer might conduct military reconnaissance and learn how to harass British India from Tibet. But World War II broke out in Europe before the climb began and Harrer and others on the team became prisoners of war. While being transferred to a new camp at Debra Dun, Harrer and several others escaped. Armed with some maps and having learned some Tibetan in the prison camp, they headed for Tibet, hoping to reach Japanese-occupied China, since Japan and Germany were Axis partners. But the war was over by the time they reached Lhasa in 1946. Harrer stayed in Tibet for four years and became friendly with Dalai, building a film projector for the teenage lama and teaching him English, geography, and science. After escaping to India, he was contacted by Ambassador Henderson. See Orville Schell, *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood* (NY: Holt, 2000) 87–93, 288–90, Knaus, *Orphans*, 96–99, and Laird, *Story of Tibet*, 280.

21. Knaus, *Orphans*, 87–98.

22. Dunham, *Buddha’s Warriors*, 111–12.

23. Knaus, *Orphans*, 100.

24. Knaus, *Orphans*, 117–20, 125; Laird, *Story of Tibet*, 323–29.

25. Knaus, *Orphans*, 124–25, 132–33.

pong, an Indian town near the Tibetan border and the center of anti-Chinese activity by Tibetans. Though hesitant to go back to Tibet in the face of growing unrest there, the Dalai Lama, again on the advice of the two State Oracles, eventually did return.<sup>26</sup>

#### Tibetan Revolt and CIA Participation

By the mid-1950s, China's drastic reform programs in Tibet were provoking widespread resistance. Its attempt to confiscate firearms from the Golok tribesmen in their homeland east of the Yangzi River sparked open rebellion. Beginning with the massacre of PLA garrison soldiers in Golok in 1956, the revolt quickly spread to Khampa and westward throughout Tibet. To President Eisenhower, "the rebellion in Tibet was tailor made for a covert action program designed to challenge communist consolidation in the Far East."<sup>27</sup> With the agreement of his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, and Director of the CIA, Allen Dulles, Eisenhower authorized CIA agents in Calcutta to cooperate with Gyalo Thondup, an elder brother of the Dalai Lama, who was paid \$180,000 per year, to be used at his discretion. This project continued for seven years, overseen by Richard Bissel, director of operations, Bissel's deputy Richard Helmes, Desmond Fitzgerald, chief of the Far Eastern Division of Operations, and John Knaus, who helped plan, direct, and deliver covert aid to the Tibetan resistance movement. The CIA recruited Tibetan refugees from the Khampa and Ando areas who were already in India, trained them in communications and intelligence gathering, and smuggled them back to Tibet to coordinate the actions of their countrymen and communicate by radio with the CIA for air drops of weapons and other matériel for the guerrilla fighters. The broader goal was to stymie Communist efforts to control Tibet.<sup>28</sup>

The Tibetans chosen to participate were taken to East Pakistan and then flown to Okinawa, Saipan, and onward for training at Camp Hale in the Colorado Rockies. After training, the men returned to East Pakistan and were then flown to Tibet in World War II-era B-17s with Polish and Czech pilots who had fled their communist ruled countries. Between 1957 and 1963, the CIA planes dropped men, arms and ammunition, money (Indian rupees), and other supplies totaling 250 tons into Tibet.<sup>29</sup>

For a number of reasons, this CIA-conducted support program met with limited success. By 1958, the PLA had 150,000 troops in eastern Tibet, with air and logistical support and overwhelming firepower. CIA handlers could not keep Tibetan tribesmen from acting spontaneously and without coordination, due to traditional habits and tribal rivalries. Many rebels lacked crucial skills, such as sending correct coordinates for air drops. In general, they had not learned the lessons of modern guerrilla warfare: they would not fight in small groups and insisted on traveling in daylight, in the open, with their women, children, and huge herds of livestock—perfect targets for airstrikes.<sup>30</sup> Nor could they build bases for resistance. Of forty-nine Tibetans trained at Camp Hale, thirty were killed, two were captured, and twelve fled to India.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, uprisings had spread widely throughout Tibet, including the Lhasa region. The CIA was fearful that the Dalai Lama would be prevented from returning to Lhasa if he accepted China's invitation to attend the meeting of the National People's Congress in Beijing. As was his wont, Dalai again consulted the State Oracles, who this time counseled flight. On 16 March 1959, he, his family, and some one hundred aides put on disguises, escaped Lhasa by night, and headed for the Indian border. Though the CIA did not plan the escape, it sent President Eisenhower daily briefings; the United States also helped secure India's permission for Dalai's party (without his armed Tibetan escort) to enter India. On learning that Dalai had

---

26. Laird, *Story of Tibet*, 186.

27. Knaus, *Orphans*, 137.

28. *Ibid.*, 137-41.

29. *Ibid.*, 146-55.

30. Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 225-43; Knaus, *Orphans*, 146-53.

31. Knaus, *Orphans*, 227-35.

escaped, Beijing replaced his government with one headed by the Panchen Lama and Ngabo. For his part, the Dalai Lama repudiated the Seventeen Article Agreement and formed a government in exile.<sup>32</sup>

Once in India, Dalai sought but failed to gain international recognition for his exilic government. The United States stalled, then agreed to assist the exiles financially and help Dalai find a refuge. But, as Allen Dulles discovered in July 1959, no Asian Buddhist country was amenable even to a visit by the Dalai Lama. The Republic of China on Taiwan, in rare accord with its political adversary the PRC, upheld China's territorial integrity and advocated local autonomy rather than independence for Tibet. At odds with China, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev conceded the PRC's right to quell revolt in Tibet and strongly supported it at the United Nations, though he criticized Mao for creating the conditions that caused the revolt. When Malaya and Ireland agreed to sponsor a motion supporting the Tibetans, the CIA even hired a public relations firm to publicize their cause. The UN resolution deploring infringements of Tibetan religious liberty and "traditional autonomy," which did not mention China by name, passed 45 to 9 with twenty-six abstentions (Britain and France included). Dalai hurt his cause by insisting he could only be received as a head of state. Thus, President Eisenhower did not receive him during his visit to India in 1959, and he remained in India for seven years. Later, on visits to Japan and Thailand, he was received only as a religious leader.<sup>33</sup>

In early 1960, President Eisenhower authorized the CIA to create a new staging base for supporting Tibetan resistance at Mustang, a small vassal state of Nepal, 350 miles southwest of Lhasa and bordering Tibet, where many ethnic Tibetans were already living. The plan was to train and equip 2,100 volunteers who would infiltrate Tibet. At Gyalo Thondup's recommendation, Baba Gen Yeshe was appointed commander of the Tibetan volunteers.<sup>34</sup> The project was intended to be secret. In 1961, the newly elected President John Kennedy gave the project his support. CIA planes dropped arms and supplies<sup>35</sup> into Mustang. As volunteers flocked in, stories in the Indian press made the operation public. Raids by the guerrillas from Mustang scored some successes but overall results were mostly disappointing.<sup>36</sup> President Lyndon Johnson, however, continued the project to distract the Chinese, who were helping North Vietnam against the United States in the Vietnam War.

The CIA ended the Mustang project in 1969 for two reasons: first, the guerrilla forces had begun to fracture under a corrupt and dictatorial leader shielded from accountability by Thondup. Disarray at the top meant a drop in activity in Tibet, where the Chinese were too entrenched for the guerrillas to be effective. After eight years, the guerrillas had outlived their usefulness. The CIA continued to subsidize them and helped resettle them in Nepal, where many took up carpet weaving, hotel keeping, and driving taxis for tourists. In 1973, the PLA moved into Mustang.<sup>37</sup> A bigger reason for changing American policy was the rapprochement with China under President Richard Nixon, which subtracted Tibet from the geopolitical equation. Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk claimed the sideshow at Mustang had only served the purpose of "doing anything we could to get in the way of the Chinese Communists." According to Winston Lord, who, as assistant to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, prepared Nixon's agenda for his China visit, Tibet, the Dalai Lama, and Mustang did not come up as issues.<sup>38</sup>

As the US-Chinese rapprochement progressed, the State Department ordered the CIA to close down Tibet House in New York. But Thondup refused to comply and won the day. In 1974, the United States ended its secret subsidy to the Dalai Lama and his government in exile on the grounds that by then they

---

32. Knaus, *Orphans*, 162–68; Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 282–304.

33. Knaus, *Orphans*, 189–214.

34. Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 333.

35. Including a vitamin-rich ration nicknamed "Khampa tsampa" (after a barley bread popular among Tibetans) developed by the Kellogg Cereal Company in Battle Creek, Michigan. See Knaus, *Orphans*, 280.

36. Knaus, *Orphans*, 237–50; Durham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 352–82.

37. Knaus, *Orphans*, 293–301; Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 386–89.

38. Knaus, *Orphans*, 309–10.

had sufficient resources.<sup>39</sup> The Dalai Lama reflected that “The U.S. support for Tibet in the 1950s was not out of moral principle or sympathy but because of the worldwide anti-Communist policies that were there. So because of that, they helped. But once their grand anti-Communist policy toward China changed (in the 1970s), then the whole thing changed.”<sup>40</sup> He also intimated that Douglas Mackiernan’s mission to Lhasa had accelerated China’s plan to invade Tibet: since the mission indicated “Washington’s willingness to provide covert military assistance, the Chinese sped up their attack.... Before the Chinese Liberation Army entered Tibet, their propaganda said that Tibet was full of imperialist influences, or the imperialist influences were very much alive in Tibet. That was the Chinese impression.”<sup>41</sup>

It is understandable that Dalai was disappointed by changing American foreign policy, which was in part based on its own national interest, as any nation’s must be. But the American people and their government felt a genuine sympathy for Tibetans striving for democracy and national self-determination. The government had approved many CIA programs intended to further the Tibetan cause, with mixed results. For example, John Knaus recalls that in a course on “nation building” at Camp Hale, “using the dialogues in Plato’s *Republic*, the trainees were asked to define justice and good government in the free Tibet for which they were fighting. But for them, dialectical discourse was properly confined to religious matters and the monasteries. They were willing to defer to the Dalai Lama and the learned monks for the kind of government they wanted. We dropped the course.”<sup>42</sup>

Another CIA program, set up in cooperation with Thondup in 1964, sought to educate young Tibetans as future civil servants for the Dalai Lama’s government. The one-year curriculum at Cornell University combined English language instruction with some materials on history and political science. But none of the Tibetans had graduated from high school; some were motivated, others not. The program was terminated in 1967, because Attorney General Nicholas Katzenback opposed CIA funding of political programs inside the United States. Some of the graduates went into business in the United States, others worked in various capacities for the Dalai Lama, for example, in the Tibet Houses in New York and New Delhi (with CIA funding), as well as helping to set up Dalai’s government in Dharamsala, India.<sup>43</sup> Of one of the Cornell students, a classmate wrote, “Galek Rimpoche’s English was quite poor when we arrived at Cornell [but] ... after only six months he was better versed in English than all the rest of us. His skill and determination were very inspiring. Today, of course, he is the head of one of the biggest Buddhist organizations in America: Jewel Heart.”<sup>44</sup>

Such examples of CIA efforts to help the Tibetan exiles in nation building bore some fruit. In retrospect, given the remoteness of their country, the United States could not have done much more to help the Tibetans, who were never able to establish proper guerrilla bases in a Maoist-style insurgency.

### India and China

When it gained independence in 1947, India ceased to be a pawn in the Great Game. It did, however, inherit Britain’s goal of bolstering its northern borders by controlling a chain of protectorates that had been vassal states of China before coming within Britain’s sphere of influence. Thus, it sent troops into Sikkim in 1949 and co-opted Bhutan’s foreign policy. In 1950, India established deeper influence in Nepal by helping its king overthrow an influential noble family. But the big issue in Sino-Indian relations was Tibet, and specifically, the MacMahon Line.

In 1949, as political power in China changed hands, the Tibetan authorities sought Indian military help in obtaining weapons and ammunition. India obliged and sent a mission to Lhasa to establish a military aid

---

39. Ibid.

40. Laird, *Story of Tibet*, 300—transcribed from an interview.

41. Ibid., 299.

42. Knaus, *Orphans*, 220.

43. Ibid., 284–85.

44. Dunham, *Buddha’s Warriors*, 365.

program that included training Tibetan troops. India also inherited the British Mission to Lhasa, even retaining its representative, H.E. Richardson.<sup>45</sup> This seemed a mutually beneficial arrangement for Tibetans to gain international recognition and India to prevent the growth of Chinese power in Tibet. In retrospect, India's quest for greater power on the Himalayan frontier was doomed to failure: it lacked Britain's pre-World War II military clout and the communist government in China, militarily stronger than India, was asserting its sovereign rights over Tibet. As mentioned above, by the 1950s, India had acknowledged Chinese sovereignty in Tibet by downgrading its mission in Lhasa and ending its military training program.

Moreover, Prime Minister Nehru made friendly relations with China a top priority in his attempt to establish and lead a neutralist bloc in the Cold War. When India did protest to China over the PLA takeover of Khampa after quelling a revolt there, it was rebuffed in no uncertain terms, a reflection of the new international reality in Asia. Thus, India did not support Tibet's appeal to the United Nations.<sup>46</sup> When the Dalai Lama visited India for the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's birth, he expressed to Nehru his distress over China's crackdown in Tibet and his wish to remain in India until the situation improved. Sarvepalli Gopal, one of Nehru's aides, recalled that "Nehru listened patiently and told the Dalai Lama that there was nothing the Government of India could do. Tibet had never been recognized as an independent country. The best hope for Tibet was to try to work within the 17-Point Agreement."<sup>47</sup> The Dalai party returned to Tibet in early 1957.

As the Tibetan revolt spread and the State Oracles favored flight, the Dalai Lama headed for the Indian border with a party of family and supporters. Nehru granted them political asylum and they entered India on 31 March 1959. China accused Nehru of harboring Tibetan rebels in Kalimpong, while his domestic opposition castigated him for his past accommodation of the PRC. Nehru informed Dalai in April of India's conditions: in his public statements, he might speak only of "autonomy," not "independence," and India would neither supply arms to Tibetans nor go to war with China over Tibet. Clearly, Nehru did not wish to involve India in a war—cold or hot—over Tibet.<sup>48</sup> Years later, Dalai recalled a part of the conversation: "I [Dalai] am determined to win independence for Tibet, but the immediate requirement is to put a stop to the bloodshed." To which Nehru replied shouting "This is impossible! You say you want independence and in the same breath you say you do not want bloodshed. Impossible!"<sup>49</sup> This exchange reveals Dalai's contradictory hopes for Tibet. The Indian government, however, took a *laissez-faire* attitude over Tibetan activities in India, allowed Dalai the *de facto* status of head of government in exile, and did not restrict his freedom of speech. Dalai at first stayed at Mussoorie, a Himalayan hill station; later, he and many Tibetans settled at Dharamsala.

China and India fought a border war in 1962 over the validity of the MacMahon Line, which no Chinese government had accepted. Because a weak China before 1949 could not actively dispute the line, Britain had not undertaken to enforce it. Independent India insisted on all Britain's territorial claims as its own and refused to negotiate the issue with China. Confronted by a strong China after 1949, it nevertheless sought to maintain a forward position that gave it a defensively advantageous boundary at the crest of the mountains. But a Tibetan revolt in and around the Khampa region led the two countries to war. The concentration of Khampa rebels in southern Tibet near the MacMahon Line drew large PLA forces seeking to prevent the escape of fleeing Khampa rebels and refugees into India.

Sino-Indian hostilities began in October 1962. Since the Indian military intelligence had been preoccupied with Pakistan, they were entirely unprepared for the war that Indian politicians, from Prime Minister Nehru down, had foolishly brought about. Rapid and humiliating defeat deflated Nehru and discredited his foreign policy. Surprisingly, rather than press its advantage, on 21 November, China unexpectedly an-

---

45. Maxwell, *India's China War*, 60–61 (note 8 above).

46. Knaus, *Orphans*, 71–74.

47. Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 178; see also Laird, *Story of Tibet*, 331.

48. Knaus, *Orphans*, 168–86.

49. Laird, *Story of Tibet*, 338.

nounced a unilateral ceasefire and troop withdrawal to twenty kilometers behind its actual prewar line of control, contingent on India's doing the same on its side. China wished to begin negotiations with India from a position of strength. However, even half a century on, a boundary has not been settled and an armed truce still persists. Nevertheless, the war terminated India's forward policy on its northern frontier and its army has maintained a defensive position well behind the line designated by China, seemingly incapable of an offensive against the PRC's superior armed forces.

In its immediate aftermath, however, the war did give the Tibetan exiles a new lease of life. India formed a Special Frontier Force of twelve thousand Tibetan soldiers; though its initial mission was to defend India's frontier, it was tacitly understood that it might operate inside Tibet in the future. The Indian Army trained the Tibetans with CIA technical assistance. More Tibetans were brought to Camp Hale for training in 1963 to assess the long-term feasibility of operations into Tibet. A US-Indian Combined Operations Center in New Delhi brought American money, tools, and training to the Tibetans, with India in control of territory and operations.<sup>50</sup>

In 1964, on the fourth anniversary of the Tibetan revolt, India allowed Dalai to promulgate a constitution for an independent Tibet. In 1965, it approved a CIA-sponsored Tibet House in New Delhi opened by Minister of Information Indira Gandhi, daughter of Prime Minister Nehru and herself later a prime minister of India.<sup>51</sup> In an episode evocative of the old Anglo-Russian Great Game more than a century earlier, in 1964, the Indian ambassador to Moscow told Thondup he should seek Soviet help to counter China in Tibet. Over the next three years, KGB men and Thondup concocted a scheme to provide Soviet money, arms, and training for Tibetans in Tashkent, USSR, and then infiltrate them back into Tibet. For the Soviets, the strategy would kill two birds with one stone, discomfiting both China and the United States. The Tibetans would be flown out of India in Soviet military planes delivering arms and supplies to help India rebuild its armed forces after its defeat at China's hands, without the knowledge of the Indian government. Thondup also asked the Soviet Union to sponsor the Tibetan cause at the United Nations, but was refused because of the international repercussions such blatant interference in China's internal affairs would cause. He then informed India's intelligence agency of his talks with the KGB, which elicited a strong warning from India. The affair died in 1969 after changes in Soviet foreign policy and Thondup's retirement from directing Tibetan "foreign affairs." As a result, there was no replaying of the Great Game in this part of Central Asia.<sup>52</sup>

#### The End of the Great Game: China Controls Tibet

International conditions at the turn of the twentieth century embroiled Tibet in the Great Game once again. British fear of perceived Russian intentions to gain access to India via Tibet led the UK to project its power into Tibet, short of annexation. A vague compromise solution revived an archaic concept of "suzerainty," which defies definition under modern international law, so that Britain could masquerade its control of Tibet under the fiction of Chinese suzerainty. Whereas the powerful China of the high Qing had afforded Tibetans a large measure of autonomy because they posed no threat to its interests there, early twentieth-century British promotion of Tibetan "autonomy" dramatically altered China's view of its frontier security. Defeats at the hands of several imperial powers since the nineteenth century, especially in its border regions, stoked Chinese nationalism in the twentieth. Since the weak China of the first half of the twentieth century could not repel the encroachment of the imperial powers, Tibet enjoyed de facto autonomy under British protection till 1950. After 1947, India, Britain's main successor state on the subcontinent, sought in vain to sustain the status quo in Tibet. As Warren W. Smith has written,

When states become more centralized and defined, political frontiers and relationships also become better defined. The idea of nationalism arose along with that of national self-determination, with the result that nations either emerged as independent states or were absorbed into other states.... Before 1950 Tibet was a nation that

---

50. Knaus, *Orphans*, 270–76.

51. *Ibid.*, 287.

52. *Ibid.*, 289–91.

was developing a national identity sufficient to exist as an independent state and to qualify for the right of national self-determination. Unfortunately Chinese nationalism was also rising with a determination to achieve the long-held goal of full Chinese sovereignty over Tibet.<sup>53</sup>

As one of the world's two superpowers and leader of the anti-Communist bloc after World War II, the United States tried to emulate the British in perpetuating the notion of Tibetan autonomy under Chinese suzerainty. Thus the establishment in 1949 of a powerful Communist government in China transformed Tibet from a prize in the Great Game of a previous era into a vexed Cold War issue. Regardless of American might, Tibet's geopolitical situation precluded any other outcome. Thus the circle has closed and, as it had in the eighteenth century, China once again controls Tibet.

---

53. *China's Tibet? Autonomy or Assimilation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) 283-84.