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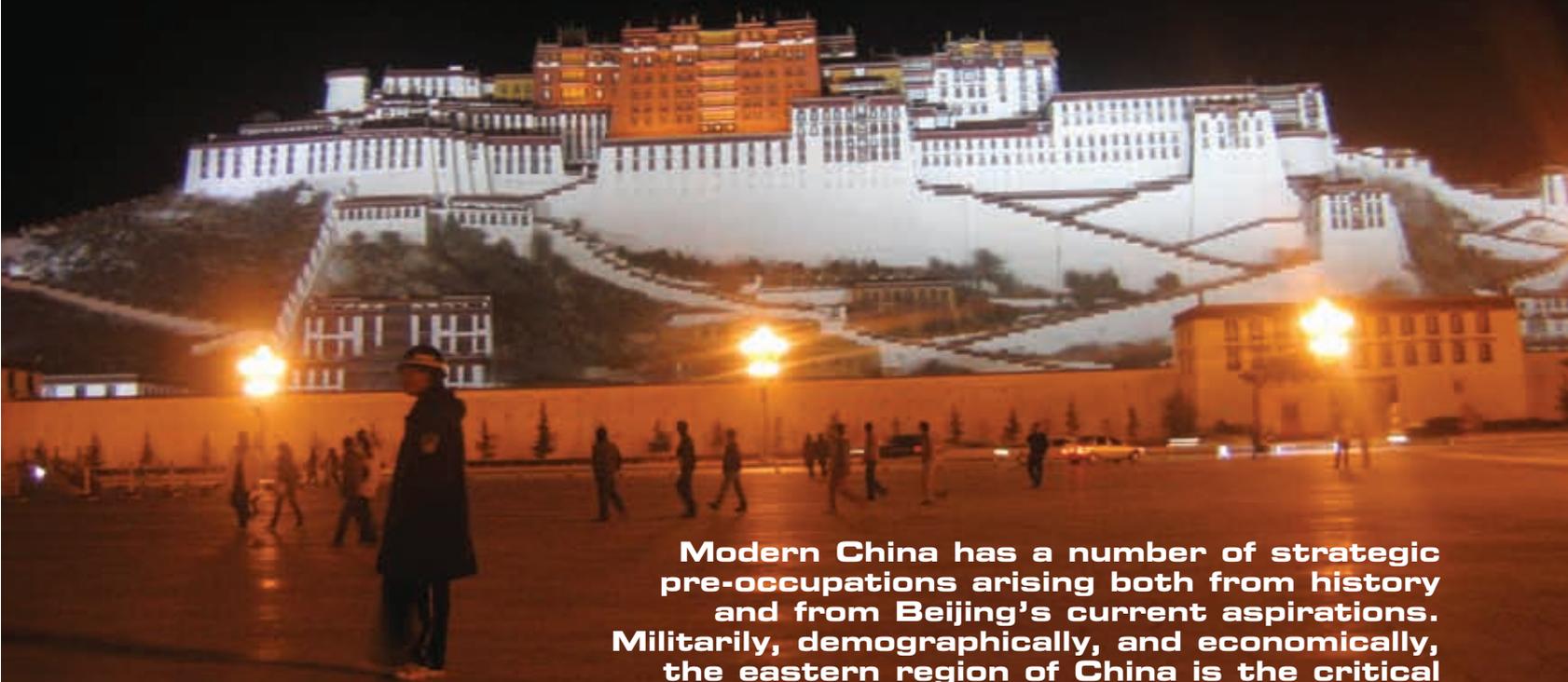
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CHINA'S TIBETAN DILEMMA

Stuart Notholt - one of only two British journalists in Lhasa at the time of the March 2008 Tibetan uprising.



The Potala Palace, Lhasa, the night before the rioting broke out. (PHOTO: Stuart Notholt)

Modern China has a number of strategic pre-occupations arising both from history and from Beijing's current aspirations. Militarily, demographically, and economically, the eastern region of China is the critical imperative: it must be defended at all costs. In its recent history, China has seen this crucial region invaded from the sea, with significant European, American, and Japanese imperial incursions. The recovery of Hong Kong and Macau notwithstanding, China still fears maritime attack from the east. Taiwan remains 'unliberated', guarded by a full US carrier group, and China remains acutely aware of its naval inadequacy compared to other major powers.

However, it is axiomatic that the Chinese have long memories, and they also recall threats from other points of the compass - Mongol invasions from the north-west, the 1904 British military expedition into Tibet, 1930s Soviet incursions into Turkestan (modern Xinjiang), and ongoing border disputes with India that flared into open conflict in 1962. Similar historical concerns, of course, prompted the construction of the Great Wall to protect the Chinese heartland. In the modern age, these priorities translate into the significance placed upon retaining Tibet, which was annexed in 1950 in the immediate aftermath of the Communist victory in the Chinese 'mainland', and other peripheral regions such as Inner Mongolia, Manchuria and Xinjiang. These regions ensure national security by anchoring the country's frontiers on impassable geographical features, sparsity, and sheer distance, while simultaneously preventing

Scuffles in street, Lhasa (PHOTO: Stuart Notholt)



Qinghui-Tibet train at Lhasa station (PHOTO: Stuart Notholt)

encroachment by rivals.

China's occupation of Tibet has attained international notoriety, not least through the diplomatic efforts of the Dalai Lama, who was awarded the Nobel Peace

Prize in 1989. However, it is worth recalling that, somewhat belying their Pacific reputation, Tibetans fought an active war of resistance for over twenty years after their homeland was invaded by the

Peoples' Liberation Army. In the mid-1950s the Chushi Gandrug (Four Rivers, Six Mountains) movement emerged as the leading insurgent organization, led by a tough nomadic trader, Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang. The 'National Uprising' escalated in 1956 following Chinese attacks on monasteries, and the CIA began arms drops that were, from a technical point of view, extremely successful: several hundred pallets of material being supplied between 1957 and 1965. CIA operatives enthused over the rugged fighting spirit of their Tibetan hosts, while simultaneously despairing that these same qualities led to a lack of tactical discipline. By the early 1960s the insurgents were in control of sizable tracts of the country, even scoring a number of successes against Chinese forces in open combat. Eventually, however, forced collectivization of potential dissident populations and better tactical use of air power served to grind down the uprising. Inevitably, it was external politics that sounded its death knell, specifically the Nixon-era rap-

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prochement between Washington and Beijing, and the withdrawal, under considerable Chinese pressure, of Nepalese logistical support.

Despite the defeat of the uprising, sporadic nationalist demonstrations and unrest continued. In March 1989 Tibet was even placed under Martial Law for the second time in its history, the first being in 1959. In March 2008, the annual commemoration of the National Uprising in the capital, Lhasa, rapidly escalated from peaceful monastic protests to the overturning and burning of cars, rioting, and attacks on Han (ethnic Chinese) shops, businesses, and, in some cases, individu-

als. The Chinese responded with a massive troop deployment, including the use of armor, but this failed to immediately quell the disturbances.

Part of the reason for the Chinese inability to respond promptly to the crisis stemmed from Beijing's policy focus on another potentially restive region, Xinjiang, in the north west. Xinjiang - which, significantly, means 'New Frontier' - is a remote territory inhabited by Uyghurs and other Islamic peoples. Like Tibet, it is seen by Beijing as a strategic buffer against potential foreign infiltration. Political stresses in Xinjiang follow a similar pattern to those in Tibet: historical claims to independence compounded by Han immigration, resource exploitation, and the suppression of religious and cultural rights.

In January 2008, Communist party chiefs announced the 'smashing' of a militant cell in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, that was planning an attack on the Beijing Olympics Games. In March, it was claimed that an attempt to destroy a civilian airliner flying to Urumqi had been foiled. Observers treated these reports with some suspicion, see-

Chinese Army trucks take up position outside the Potala Palace in Lhasa (PHOTO: Stuart Notholt)



ing them as part of the ongoing strategy of aligning Beijing's security interests with US fears of international Islamist terrorism. Indeed, it is not clear whether the authorities themselves believed in the reality of the Islamic threat, whether it was for Western consumption, or if they simply started to believe their own propaganda. While it seems, in retrospect, naive to have assumed that Tibetans would not take the opportunity to protest in the year of the Beijing Olympics, there is ample evidence (to which this author can testify) that the Chinese were wrong-footed by the speed and ferocity with which the Lhasa fighting erupted and spread, not just in Tibet but, for the first time in twenty years, to Tibetan populated districts in China itself. The protests that followed the Olympic torch around the world further threatened to turn Beijing's Olympic propaganda coup into a public relations nightmare.

The Dalai Lama himself has remained punctilious in his rejection of violence, supporting Beijing's right to hold the 2008 Olympics and even conceding that China might continue to exercise sovereignty over a truly autonomous Tibet. This moderation has, however, availed him little. Beijing's recent (and probably cosmetic) offer of talks notwithstanding, he continues to be reviled in the Chinese media as a 'splittist' intent on dividing China, and his supporters as violent and racist thugs. Although the Dalai Lama's moral standing among Tibetans is unassailable, it is unlikely that an increasingly frustrated Tibetan population universally shares his eschewal of violence. It is not impossible, therefore, that some Tibetan elements could, regardless of the reputation and practical risks, turn to a renewal of armed insurrection.

As in any insurgency, their key task would be to raise the military, economic and other costs of the occupation to levels where they become unsustainable. The Chinese occupation of Tibet is already expensive. To suppress the March 2008 unrest, the Chinese admitted to deploying 10,000 troops in a city with a total population of only 160,000. Evidence suggests that the proportion of security forces to civilians throughout Tibet may routinely be as high as one in twenty. The resources



Tibetan demonstrators protest against the Chinese crack-down in London (PHOTO: Stuart Notholt)

of the Peoples' Liberation Army, although considerable, are not infinite. A general uprising could place significant strains on the security forces as they attempt to police a huge and poorly connected territory with a civil population at best sullen and uncooperative. Guerrillas could relatively easily, in theory, threaten industrial assets. Transport links would be particularly vulnerable: in 1961 Tibetan attacks forced the closure of the strategic Sinkiang-Lhasa Highway. A promising contemporary target would be the 1,956 km long Qinghui-Tibet railway that opened in July 2006, linking Lhasa to Xian. A remarkable technical achievement, the railway rises to some 15,000 feet at its highest point (oxygen masks are provided

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for the comfort of passengers suffering from altitude sickness) making it the world's highest conventional railway. For over 500 km it runs through barren and utterly inhospitable permafrost. Here, the civil engineering challenge is to prevent any partial thawing of the ice that would warp or destroy the track. One feature, easily visible from the train itself, is the regular series of 15 cm diameter tubes that extend some 5 meters below the frozen soil surface. These contain liquid ammonia and, if temperatures rise, this evaporates, dissipating heat and providing a self-regulating cooling of the system.

The Chinese regard the Qinghui-Tibet railway as a 'bridge over the roof of the world' facilitating the incorporation of Tibet into the broader Chinese economy. Extractive and other industries are being aligned to take advantage of the new railway - for example the establishment of the Zhengtong Logistics Company for the export of 10,000 tons per annum of lead/gold powder, and of the '5100 brand' of bottled mineral water.

Unsurprisingly, Tibetans see the railway as a key piece in the Chinese exploitative apparatus, moving Han settlers and



Unfortunately for any would-be insurgents, these facts are as obvious to the security forces as to anyone else. The railway has climate sensors every kilometer along the final Golmud/Lhasa section and over a thousand video monitors in total.

troops into their country, and primary resources out. Simple vandalism of the cooling pipes, allowing ammonia to vent into the atmosphere, could disable the railway or at the very least have nuisance value - and for the international respectability of the Tibetan cause the non-lethal nature of such attacks would be an added bonus. Culverts, created to allow the migration of yaks and other wildlife,

would offer an additional target should explosives become available.

Unfortunately for any would-be insurgents, these facts are as obvious to the security forces as to anyone else. The railway has climate sensors every kilometer along the final Golmud/Lhasa section and over a thousand video monitors in total. Failures in the environmental control systems are instantly relayed to a central control room. These systems could easily acquire a military dimension (if indeed they have not already done so) particularly if combined with body-heat tracking and other remote sensing technologies. Furthermore, insurgents caught in the vicinity of the railway would be at a terrible disadvantage. Although surrounding hills provide a potential refuge, the railway itself runs through totally exposed territory. Anyone caught in the open would be a sitting target for air attack, either by conventional aircraft or pilotless drones.

There are a number of additional reasons

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why a new uprising would almost certainly fail. The chances of any foreign agency providing support are minimal, although it is just conceivable that, one day, rival players such as India or Russia might exploit Tibetan dissent as a counterweight to expanding Chinese regional hegemony. Equally, given Chinese influence over its smaller neighbors, no rear base would be available, unlike in the 1960s when the Tibetans established themselves in the Mustang province of Nepal.

There is, however, one scenario under which China might be forced to disgorge Tibet. As an autarkic Communist state, China was insulated from the vagaries of the world economy. That situation no longer pertains. One highly significant pointer for the future is that the Shanghai Stock Market lost 4% of its value over a few hours in March 2008 - not as the result of the fighting in Tibet, but because of the precipitate collapse of a US bank, Bear Stearns. There are indications that the Chinese economic miracle is already overheating, with significant

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shortages of grains and fuel reported.

A repeat of, say, the 1997 Asian economic crash would hit China just as hard as other regional economies. That crisis forced urgent retrenchment by the military in another autocratic state, Indonesia, obliging Jakarta to withdraw from its long-running colonial exposure in East Timor. That something of the sort could happen in Tibet is an intriguing possibility.

Should Beijing falter in providing the new business and consumer classes with

material advancement, calls for political reform would grow at the very time when the military's capacity for intervention would be contracting through financial strictures. As in Indonesia, a harsh re-prioritization of security necessities might then conclude that imperial outposts such as Tibet would have to be jettisoned in favor of the defense of the heartland against emerging internal security threats. The 'social contract' between Beijing and the great mass of Chinese citizenry who have thus far not benefited from economic growth is the promise of an eventual flowing of wealth from east to west. How quiescent the majority of Chinese will remain if economic redistribution fails is the central problem facing modern China. The profound irony of the last great avowedly Communist state is that if ever there was a country increasingly ripe for a rural Communist revolution, it is the Peoples' Republic of China. The scope of opportunity for a modern Mao Tse Tung - or perhaps a Gampo Tashi Andrugtsang - may yet to be realized. ■

Permafrost terrain, seen from the Qinghui-Tibet railway (PHOTO: Stuart Notholt)

