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RESISTANCE IN TIBET

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Since the occupation of Tibet* in 1951, Communist China has been faced with sporadic resistance. During the past two and one-half years, resistance has hardened and grown despite Chinese countermeasures that include military force as well as partial withdrawal of Chinese cadres and postponement of "reforms" and other programs leading toward socialization. Retreat and retrenchment notwithstanding, Communist goals remain unchanged: the socialization of Tibet and its complete integration -- political, social, and economic -- with Communist China. Basic factors in the Tibetan situation -- its historical status, the rigorous terrain and climate, and the rigid structure of Tibetan society -- suggest that the realization of Chinese goals will be difficult and protracted.

A major obstacle to Communist political control in Tibet is the Tibetan legacy of independence. In antiquity Tibet was a fully independent state controlling a territory extending considerably beyond its present confines. Not until the early 18th century, when Manchu armies invaded and occupied Lhasa, did Tibet come directly under the domination of the Emperor of China. Even then Tibet retained its autonomy in local affairs. Boundaries were established, with Lhasa's jurisdiction extending east to the Upper Yangtze (the Chin-sha Chiang) and north to the Thanglha Range. Between Outer Tibet and the areas under Chinese control in Szechwan and Kansu, however, were the turbulent Tibetan-inhabited borderlands in which little or no control was exercised from either Lhasa or China.

When Manchu control in Tibet weakened in the late 19th century, Tibet attained autonomous status under Chinese suzerainty. Attempts were made to reassert Chinese control by military action in the early 1900's, but the overthrow of the Manchus (1911) removed the last vestiges of Chinese authority. From then until 1951 Tibet remained autonomous, although during much of this period its policies were pro-British as a result of British action (the 1904-05 Younghusband Expedition) to improve trade and maintain an independent buffer state north of India. After the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, unsuccessful attempts were again made to reassert Chinese control over Outer Tibet. In 1928, however, the Chinese Nationalists carved out two ostensibly Chinese provinces -- Sikang and Tsinghai -- that included part of Outer Tibet and almost all of the Tibetan Borderlands. Actually, in both provinces, Chinese authority was limited to a few of the larger towns. Although the western boundary of Sikang was arbitrarily drawn some 80 miles east of Lhasa, the Chinese were unable to extend their de facto control farther west than the traditional Upper Yangtze boundary.

Various aspects of the physical environment in Tibet -- particularly terrain, climate, and location -- pose serious obstacles to Chinese Communist operations. Vast, desolate plateaus to the north and high mountains and deep river valleys to the east are formidable barriers that isolate and protect the major centers of Tibetan authority in Southern Tibet, located principally in the middle reaches of the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) and its tributaries. Here are located the chief urban centers, and much of the cultivated land, as well as Lhasa, the capital and seat of political and religious power. Consequently, Chinese activity has focused on Southern Tibet and major efforts have been directed toward construction of communication links with Chinese bases across the outlying barrier regions.

Eastern Tibet (loosely known as Kham) is the second most important region of Tibet, containing the upper reaches of the Salween, Mekong, and Yangtze Rivers that flow in tremendous, rocky, north-south-aligned gorges. On the interfluvial divides at 13,000 to 15,000 feet are grassy plateaus that support considerable grazing. The topographic complexity isolates the productive areas and severely restricts communications, thus contributing to the political fragmentation of Kham, the continuance of petty feudatories, and a favorable milieu for guerrilla warfare. Communist activity in Eastern Tibet has been concentrated on the construction and maintenance of the Szechwan-Lhasa road and connecting routes and on the control of major urban centers such as Ch'ang-tu.

*As used here the term "Tibet" refers to the area traditionally controlled from Lhasa, the "Tibet Region" of the Chinese Communists, which consists of Tibet and the Ch'ang-tu Area. According to other definitions, Tibet is also synonymous with the terms "Outer Tibet" and "Political Tibet". Tibetan-inhabited territory, however, extends far beyond the core of the area into what is sometimes referred to as the "Tibetan Borderlands", or as "Inner Tibet". These Tibetan-inhabited areas have been organized into several tzu-chih chou (autonomous districts) in the provinces of Tsinghai, Szechwan, Kansu, and Yunnan.

Northern Tibet is a vast plateau (the Chang Thang) 14,000 to 16,000 feet in elevation, enclosed on the north and south by mountains more than 20,000 feet high. It is a region of internal drainage with numerous large brackish lakes, particularly in the southeast. Although extensive grazing grounds -- mainly in the southern half -- support nomads and their flocks, much of the Chang Thang is desolate and uninhabited. Except for mineralogical explorations and small-scale exploitation of borax, Chinese activity in this barrier region has been nil.

Adjoining the Chang Thang to the northeast is an outer plateau -- Northeastern Tibet -- having physical features similar to the Chang Thang but differentiated by external drainage, somewhat lower elevations (12,000 to 14,000 feet), and more extensive grazing grounds. Major Chinese effort has been expended in the construction and maintenance of the road from Tsinghai and Kansu to Lhasa, which crosses this region. In Northeastern Tibet the Chinese have also engaged in mineralogical exploration and, to a limited extent, in political activity among the Tibetan nomads.

Western Tibet (A-li), largely isolated from the rest of Tibet, consists of mountains, plateaus, and the gorges and ravines of the Suttlej and Upper Indus Rivers. The principal activity of the few Chinese troops quartered here is directed toward political security -- a matter of some concern to the Chinese because of the considerable trade and pilgrim traffic with India and Nepal. A recently constructed road connects A-li with Chinese supply bases in Sinkiang, and infrequent truck convoys provide another tenuous link across the Chang Thang with Hei-ho (Nagchhu Dzong).

Terrain factors have made construction and maintenance of communication facilities to and within Tibet difficult and costly and, in many areas, have severely complicated Chinese control. Agriculture is also a precarious enterprise since the amount of arable land in Tibet is limited by excessive elevations and severe climate. Most of the food required for Chinese personnel in Tibet has been trucked in from China or imported from India. The specter of food shortages, aggravated by an influx of Chinese colonists, has been an exacerbating factor in Sino-Tibetan relations.

Possibly the most important basic factor obstructing implementation of Chinese Communist plans in Tibet is the rigid and unyielding structure of Tibetan society. Tibetan society is inseparable from Lamaism, or Tibetan Buddhism, which in itself is virtually the State. Supreme spiritual and temporal authority is vested in the head of the Lamaist Church -- the Dalai Lama -- whose spiritual influence extends far beyond the limits of the political control of Lhasa. The many monasteries found in Tibetan-inhabited areas provide visible evidence of the spiritual dominance of Lamaism. The monasteries also possess great economic influence through their large landholdings and control of wealth. The clergy is an extremely conservative force and, even before the advent of the Communists, had strongly resisted modernization or modification of the traditional Tibetan way of life. Although the Tibetan nobility is numerically small, it has considerable power through hereditary positions in the government and ownership of land and trading concerns.

Most Tibetans, however, are neither monks nor nobles but peasants, often tenants, or nomadic herders. Although the chief domains of the nomads are the southern half of the Chang Thang, Northeastern Tibet, and parts of Kham, they are found throughout Tibet. Their mobility makes them less susceptible to control than the sedentary agriculturalists. The Goloks, a particularly turbulent group of nomadic tribes inhabiting the southeastern part of Tsinghai, have remained outside the pale of control by either the Chinese or Lhasa. Despite the social and economic inequalities between the upper and lower levels of Tibetan society -- a situation likely to be exploited by the Communists -- feudal traditions continue to be a significant impediment to change.

From 1951 through 1954 the Chinese Communists moved cautiously in Tibet. Aside from establishing and maintaining their military garrisons, Chinese programs were largely limited to local agricultural assistance and public health. During 1955 and 1956, however, the Chinese either initiated or announced intentions of initiating numerous programs, including the organization (March 1955) of a Preparatory Committee for a Tibet Autonomous Region (inaugurated April 1956), the setting-up of an administrative hierarchy staffed mainly by Chinese officials, and the establishment of limited economic and social construction projects. Additionally, the Chinese began in certain areas to institute "democratic reform," a term covering such acts as land redistribution, abolition of certain "feudal" practices, and general measures designed to prepare the populace for future steps on the road to socialism.

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In late 1955 and early 1956, armed uprisings occurred in Kham -- specifically in the vicinity of Li-t'ang, Pa-an (Batang), and Te-ko, but possibly in other areas as well -- and in the Golok-inhabited region of Tsinghai. The revolts in Kham reportedly were triggered by the imposition of "democratic reforms" that hit particularly hard at the power of the monasteries. Military action was necessary to quell these revolts. Information is meager as to the extent and duration of the fighting, but it was sufficiently serious to cause refugees to flee to Lhasa. Sporadic fighting still is reported, and there are indications that even larger areas are involved. Furthermore, the road from Szechwan reportedly was cut in several places. This is probably true since natural conditions such as heavy rains and landslides are sufficient to render certain sections inoperable for days or weeks; and with only a little human assistance, long sections of the road could be put out of operation for indefinite periods, thus blocking the movement of Chinese personnel and supplies. Finally, the events of 1956 brought to light a Tibetan underground movement, the Mimang, which has operated both with and without Tibet using pamphlets and similar media in a psychological warfare campaign against the Chinese Communists.

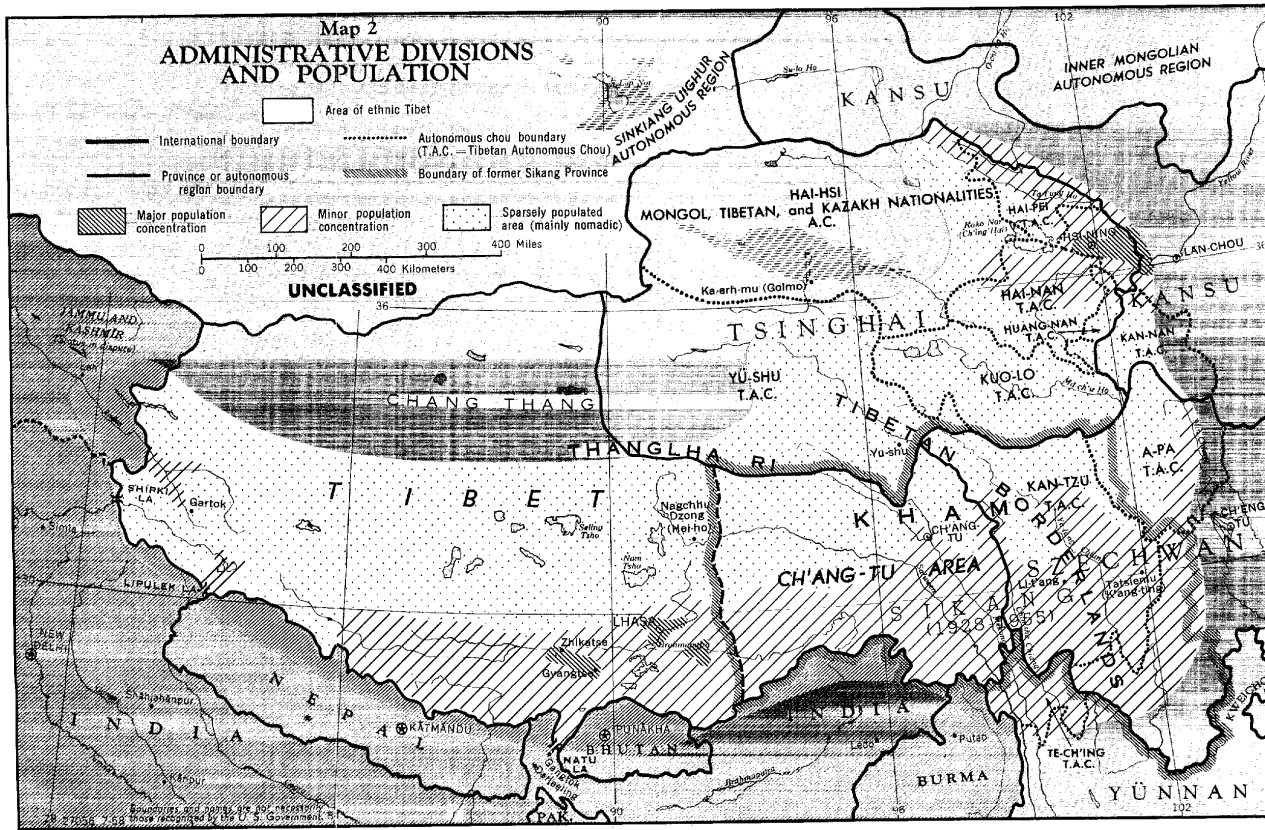
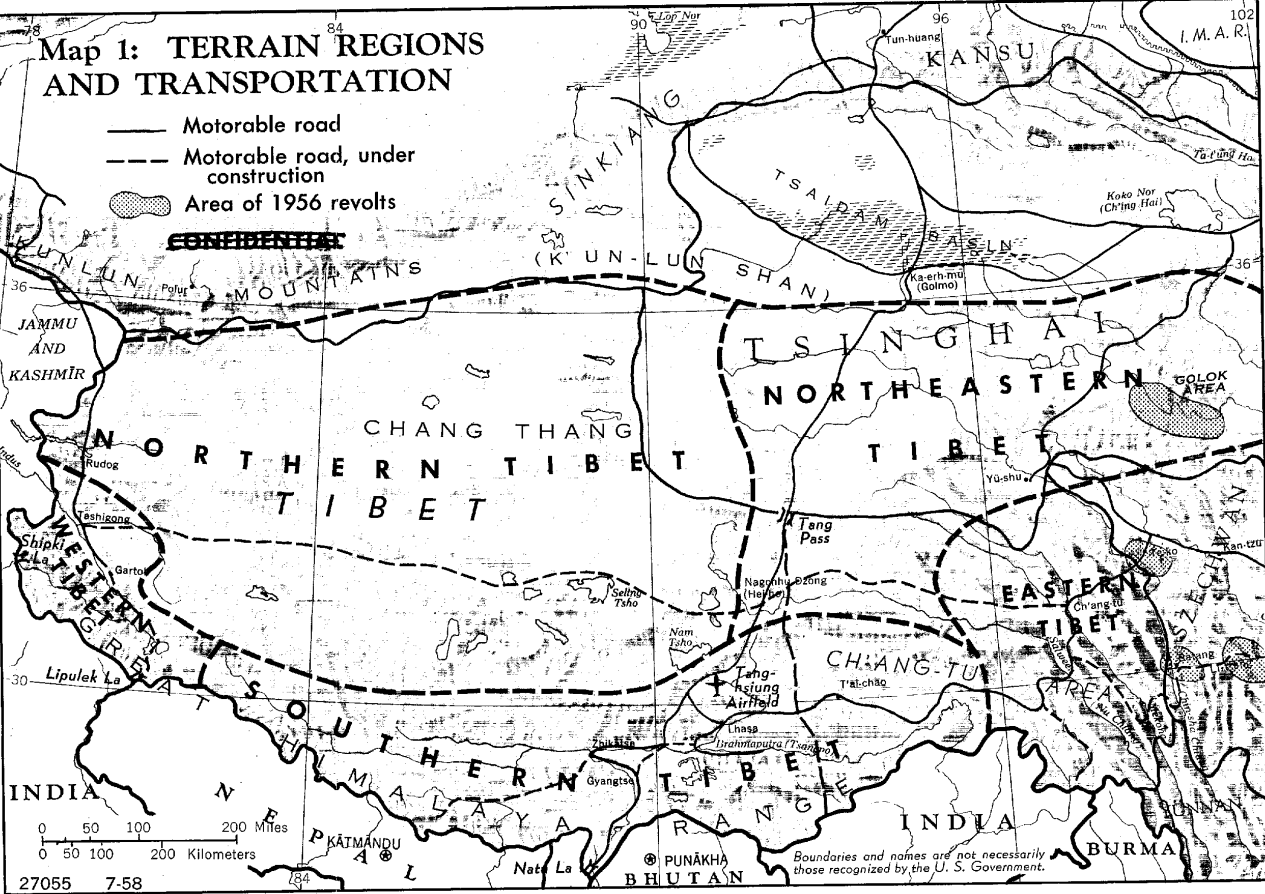
The violent Tibetan reactions caused the Chinese to take stock, and several speeches in early 1956 attempted to allay Tibetan fears. Despite these assurances, however, Chinese plans for reform continued apace. In this political climate the Dalai Lama left Tibet for India, in December 1956, to participate in a Buddhist celebration; and while there he talked with Nehru and Chou En-lai. For Tibetan aspirations, the timing of the discussions was favorable, coming shortly after the world-wide indignation generated by the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution.

Whether or not the discussions in India had a bearing upon future developments in Tibet, Mao shortly thereafter (27 February 1957) aired the Tibet problem in his famous speech, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People." In it, Mao stated that although reforms of the social system in Tibet were inevitable, the time was not yet ripe, that implementation would not take place during the Second Five-Year Plan (1958-1963), and that the introduction of reforms must wait until "the great majority of the people of Tibet and their leading public figures consider it practical." At this time, however, Communist socialization measures had already been instituted in the Tibetan Borderlands. Announcements from Lhasa later in 1957 revealed that "most" of the Han Chinese cadres were to be withdrawn, much of the Chinese administrative and social superstructure was to be dismantled, and most economic construction projects curtailed. Communist efforts continue, however, with emphasis upon indoctrination and training of Tibetan cadres, increased cultural exchanges between Tibet and China, and continued construction and improvement of communication facilities.

Although the timetable for the socialization of Tibet has been postponed, the machinations of Peking could easily result in abrupt policy reversals. During the past year, for example, dissatisfaction with Tibet's obduracy toward socialism has been noted in speeches and editorials in the Chinese press.

Basic unifying factors, however, indicate that the process of leading Tibet to socialism may be prolonged. The traditional spirit of independence has been given new life by the revolts and by the partial withdrawal of Chinese civilian personnel. Despite road construction and improved communications, great areas remain isolated; and the mobility of nomadic groups favors continued dissident activities. Although the Dalai Lama has publicly endorsed Peking's policies, he has resisted complete domination and continues to be a vital national symbol to the Tibetans. Also, it is unlikely that the age-old suspicions and hostility of Tibetan toward Chinese will diminish, or that the arrogance (Pan-Hanism) of a Chinese toward a Tibetan will be easily overcome. Finally, a harsh Chinese policy in Tibet and punitive military actions might create unfavorable reactions in Asia, particularly in such "neutral" nations as India and Burma. The Chinese Communists are in military control of Tibet; but the fires of Tibetan resistance remain smoldering.

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