

THE RATIONALE FOR INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION:

A Comparative Case Study of East Timor and Tibet

Gaining independence earlier this year, East Timor is the United Nations' most recent success story. International support for the independence of East Timor was overwhelming, especially by Australia, which once recognized the Indonesian occupation of the country. In comparison, on the issue of Tibet, another occupied country, the international community is silent.

The comparison is valuable due to the very similar circumstances East Timor shared with Tibet during Indonesian rule. Both East Timor and Tibet were annexed by a more powerful foreign neighbor and experienced significant loss of life and horrific human rights violations. Until the mid 1990s, East Timor, like Tibet today, did not feature as an important issue in the United Nations General Assembly or Security Council. United Nations resolutions were passed but none called for intervention. Economically, East Timor was the poorest region of Indonesia and Tibet is still the most impoverished of all of China. Chinese migrants into Tibet are marginalizing Tibetans, much like the Indonesian migrant experience in East Timor. How did the international community determine its support for sovereignty in East Timor while continuing to support Chinese rule in Tibet?

Through examination of journal and news reports, commentaries by authorities, the paper details an exploration into the rationale for international action and indifference in East Timor and Tibet, two international cases of invasion. The ramifications of international reaction to Tibet will be evaluated and the present situation in East Timor will be highlighted briefly.

East Timor

The Invasion

The people of East Timor, with a population of approximately 800 000, are made up of several ethnic groups, with the majority being Malay and Papuan. With 91.4% being Roman Catholic, the country has a largely Christian population.

East Timor, while still under Portuguese colonial rule, was added to the United Nations Non-Self Governing Territories in 1960. In the mid-1970s, after more than 450 years of colonial rule, Portugal attempted to establish a provisional government to decide on the future of East

Timor. In 1975, Portugal withdrew in the midst of a civil conflict between pro-independence and pro-integration factions. Indonesia invaded East Timor and in 1976, annexed it as an Indonesian province.

International Reaction until 1990

The United Nations did not recognize the Indonesian claim and the Security Council passed resolutions calling on Indonesia to withdraw and for all states to respect the territorial sovereignty of East Timor. However, little was done to protect the East Timorese or intervene on their behalf. Australia and India formally recognized the Indonesian occupation and one author further noted that “[A]s a matter of policy, the United States and many other countries have recognized the integration of East Timor into Indonesia...” In fact, the world paid little attention to East Timor until 1991, when the Indonesian army fired upon a group of demonstrators conducting a mourning service at a cemetery in Dili, killing or wounding over 100 people. The media attention received due to the broadcasting of the incident forced foreign governments to confront the issue. As a result, the confrontation proved a turning point in the East Timorese struggle for independence. East Timor was highlighted again in international media during the APEC summit of 1994, when demonstrations were held to mark the anniversary of the Dili incident.

The Obsolescence of Anti-Communism

The international response to East Timor changed following the fall of the Soviet Union. Until then, it was mainly the geo-political strategic interests of the Cold War that preserved Indonesian interests in East Timor. The pro-independence faction called Fretilin was a radical left-wing group and Indonesia was a staunch anti-communist state and extremely important to US strategic interests in the security of the region. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Indonesia’s rejection of communism became useless. Coupled with international media attention spurred by the release of a videotape of a clash between the Indonesian army and East Timorese, Indonesia’s demise as a vital strategic partner prompted the United States to cut off military training assistance to Indonesia. Although the incident at Dili was hardly the first display of violence against East Timorese (thousands more died during the first few years after Indonesia annexed East Timor), military assistance was not cut off or reduced prior to the attention received by the clash.

Transition to Independence

In 1998, Indonesia offered East Timor limited autonomy within Indonesia. Talks between Indonesia, Portugal and the United Nations then progressed to a signed agreement between Indonesia and Portugal entrusting the United Nations to organize a ‘popular consultation’ with the people of East Timor. The consultation was to determine whether the people of East Timor would accept or reject a limited autonomy within the state of Indonesia and the results were to

be binding on both Indonesia and East Timor. Following the decision of the people, either transition to independence or complete integration with Indonesia was to take place. On August 30, 1999, 78.5% of the East Timorese population rejected autonomy within Indonesia. Although announcement of the results led to violence instigated by pro-integration militia, the transition to independence began with extensive UN involvement. East Timor achieved full independence on May 20, 2002.

Tibet

The Invasion

Tibetans are quite distinct religiously, culturally, linguistically and ethnically from the Han Chinese, which comprise 90% of the Chinese population. The population of Tibet is largely Buddhist and until Chinese invasion, was governed by the spiritual leadership of the Dalai Lama. In 1949, following its triumph over the Nationalist forces, the Chinese Communist Party declared the 'recovery' of Tibet to be a primary objective. Talks between the Chinese and Tibetan governments were not successful and the small Tibetan resistance forces were easily overcome by the powerful Chinese military. By 1951, negotiations between Tibet and China proved futile and the Peoples' Liberation Army of China had occupied much of Tibet and threatened to conquer Lhasa. Under intense pressure, the Tibetans signed the infamous "17-Point Agreement", which relinquished Tibetan independence and gave China control over Tibet's defense and foreign affairs while supposedly allowing for internal political and religious autonomy.

China's claim to Tibet is justified based on two main facts: the absorption of Tibet during the Manchu dynasty and the Seventeen Points Agreement. The Manchu rule of Tibet lasted only approximately 200 years. Prior to its incorporation into the Manchu empire, Tibet had been twice invaded by the Mongols and enjoyed complete sovereignty in the periods in between. Nevertheless, with the 1911 revolution and the toppling of the Manchu dynasty, the ties between China and Tibet were clearly severed. By 1912, Tibet had expelled the Chinese and consolidated its territory. In 1913, Tibet declared its independence. Until its occupancy 1949, Tibet had engaged the Chinese government as well as Great Britain in negotiations concerning its status and effectively repelled Chinese attempts at integration. As a result, from the period 1913-1949, Tibet had effectively demonstrated at least *de facto* if not *de jure* independence

and qualities of statehood.

Any debate on its historical claim to Tibet is, according to the Chinese, solved by the 17 Point Agreement, in which Tibet agreed to be become integrated into China. There are various and at times conflicting perspectives on the validity of this agreement. Some sources view the agreement as having no validity because the Tibetans signed the agreement under great pressure and imminent occupation. Other sources claim the Tibetan people welcomed the agreement as a way to preserve internal autonomy because this mattered most. Still other sources assert that the Tibetan delegation did not have authority to sign the agreement and thus the agreement is void under international law. Regardless, the facts remain that the Chinese government sought to sign a legal agreement with the government of Tibet to legitimize an invasion. If China had clear title to Tibetan territory, it would not have sought permission from the Tibetan government to integrate the area and establish Chinese rule. Furthermore, the immediate threat of Chinese occupation was undoubtedly a determining factor in the signing of the agreement, as previously, the Tibetan government had never sought integration with China.

The response of the international community against China was stronger prior to Communist China's recognition in the United Nations. Nonetheless, even prior to 1971, the international response was carefully calculated in politics, with little regard for humanitarian interests. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations with China, the issue of Tibet faded from international attention.

Appeal to the International Community

Until the Chinese approach to Lhasa, Tibet was relatively unknown in the international community. It had not applied to the United Nations or the League of Nations for membership. In fact, no state recognized its independence in 1913. Sources indicate that Tibet did not care to gain international recognition and thus, it is unclear to what degree this indifference influenced its non-recognition by the international community. Nevertheless, when faced with the imminent Chinese occupation, the Tibetan government appealed to the UN to "intercede on [its] behalf and restrain Chinese aggression". However, with the issue of Korea dominating international relations, India's reluctance to antagonize China and the indifference of the Security Council, the issue of Tibet was not a priority on the UN agenda.

With much of the world ignorant of the situation in Tibet, the British, Indian and American governments were the most active in determining the international response. Although the British let India take the lead on this issue, the British Foreign Office had reportedly concluded that Tibet "from 1913, not only enjoyed full control over her internal affairs but also has maintained direct relations on her own account with other States [and as such] she must be regarded as a State to which Article 35 (2) of the UN Charter applies". Still, this position was never stated publicly; the British delegation to the United Nations recommended that the

position of the British government should maintain that the legal status of Tibet was “extremely obscure”. The British reluctance to accord Tibet sovereign status can be found in its own colonial claims. Britain at the time had a number of states under its suzerain rule. To take a position on Tibet could have raised questions on Britain’s legal claims to such territories. The United States was initially prepared to “[consider the] recognition of Tibet as an independent State” and recognized the de facto autonomy of Tibet. However, the need for support over the US stand on Korea took precedence and the United States resisted raising the issue of Tibet in the United Nations. American motives in its support of Tibet were clear in the late 1950s, when the United States provided assistance to the Tibetan resistant forces through the involvement of the CIA in an attempt, not to aid the Tibetans in gaining autonomy but to cause difficulties for communist China.

Without any external support, Tibet was left to tangle with the might of Chinese military power. The ensuing Chinese victory and the signing of the “17 Point Agreement” cemented Tibet’s surrender to the Chinese. In the aftermath of its occupation of Tibet, it is clear the Chinese did not even honor the Seventeen Points Agreement. Tibetans today have no internal autonomy and are extremely oppressed.

The International Commission of Jurists

After the invasion of Tibet, the International Commission of Jurists published two reports concerning the legal status of Tibet and the issue of genocide. The Commission concluded that China had been committing genocide in Tibet and found that Tibet had “demonstrated from 1913 to 1950 the conditions of statehood as generally accepted under international law”. These findings formed the basis of debate in the United Nations but did not result in any permanent position. Although three resolutions were later passed in 1959, 1961 and 1965 by the UN General Assembly, the international community continued to refrain from any strong resolutions against China. With the Nationalist government of Taiwan also declaring Tibet as a part of China, there were no Security Council resolutions.

Waning International Support

The United States proved reluctant to antagonize China in the late 1960s and early 1970s Chinese-Soviet relations faltered, providing opportunity for increased diplomatic exchanges between Washington and Beijing. Tibet began to slowly fade from the international spotlight. Following Communist China’s re-admittance to the Security Council in 1971 and the full establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States, the issue of Tibet was effectively dismissed. Initial support for Tibet by the United States was an attempt at undermining the capabilities of Communist China. In contemporary international relations, the issue of Tibet arises only rarely and China’s claim to Tibet is largely tolerated.

Struggle for Democracy in 1989

Since the 1970s, the international community consistently ignored the human rights record of China until 1989, when the Chinese army suppressed a protest movement at Tiananmen Square with casualties in the hundreds. The protestors campaigned for economic and political reform. Foreign governments expressed great horror at the 'blatant violation of human rights' and the incidents at Tiananmen Square have since come to symbolize the struggle for freedom and democracy. The United States in fact went so far as to impose economic sanctions against China; in 1990, the G-7 countries called for economic and political reform in China. However, foreign governments hardly reacted when China brutally suppressed the Tibetan uprisings of 1959, which was a culmination of a struggle for freedom and in opposition of the cultural and human genocide against Tibet. Interestingly, the incident at Tiananmen Square was a movement for reforms that would open China to the world, reforms that would give foreign states access to the world's largest consumer market and reforms that would promote democracy during the Cold War era.

Peaceful vs. Guerilla Campaigns

Today, economic and political interests play a primary role in the general acceptance among states of the occupation of Tibet. Tibet is not launching guerilla campaigns and is instead being led by the exiled Dalai Lama, who is pursuing peaceful methods of furthering Tibetan desires. There is no actual 'conflict' in Tibet- simply a population being slowly eliminated culturally and physically. Nor is there spillover of the conflict to neighboring countries. With the issue of Tibet is well contained, it does not cause regional instability and can thus be ignored.

In comparison, the pro-independence group Fretilin, formed in 1974, carried out an armed resistance against the Indonesian army since the occupation of East Timor until independence. Fretilin formed East Timor's first government in May 2002.

China- A World Power

China's position as a permanent member of the Security Council prevents the imposition of binding resolutions regarding Tibet. The Chinese veto thus prevents the United Nations from playing an effective role in the issue of Tibetan autonomy. Indonesia on the other hand, does not hold such power.

Furthermore, China is a world economic power, with the largest consumer market and very attractive foreign investment incentives. Large areas of Tibet are being 'developed' for foreign investment and the Tibetan environment is exploited in the name of profit. Foreign governments will not benefit from addressing the issue of Tibetan autonomy or human rights violations against Tibetans. To maintain favorable relations with China, foreign governments are very hesitant to raise the matter of Tibet in any serious capacity. Moreover, multinational corporations with investments or prospects in Tibet wield

immense lobbying power and are unlikely to support any autonomy for Tibet, as negotiations to exploit Tibet would likely be far more difficult with an indigenous Tibetan government.

Despite the obvious and intense need for humanitarian intervention and the addressing of human rights in Tibet, foreign governments are reluctant to pressure China too much. In fact, the Chinese accuse Western governments of using human rights allegations to provoke trade concessions from China. Considering the record of international involvement in Tibet, this is hardly unbelievable.

Conclusion

Clearly, it is political, strategic and economic interests that govern the international community's response to international issues such as self-determination. Human rights is an attractive concept extremely useful in appeasing national populations and in coating the real motives for involvement in international issues. To date, 1.2 million Tibetans have been killed during Chinese occupation. With the international community displaying such self-interested policies towards China, it is not impossible that the current genocide of the Tibetans will ultimately result in an extremely weakened and insignificant population easily assimilated into the broader Chinese context.

The international community and China's primary economic partners in particular, must play a more active role in pressuring China to improve its human rights record concerning Tibet. While complete independence is unlikely considering the present situation, the international community must assert greater support and recognition for the Dalai Lama and the proposals for autonomy put forth by the Tibetan government-in-exile.

Interestingly, China's position on East Timor is stated as following: "The issue of East Timor has been left over from the past. Our basic position on this issue is that first, the choice made by the people of East Timor should be respected and second, relevant issues should be solved in a just and reasonable manner through peaceful consultations among all parties concerned within the framework of the United Nations." Ironically, China does not follow this stance on its own situation with Tibet, denying the people of Tibet the right to decide their future.

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