

by STRATFOR

"Here begins our tale: The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus it has ever been." This opening adage of Romance of the Three Kingdoms, China's classic novel of war and strategy, best captures the essential dynamism of Chinese geopolitics. At its heart is the millennia-long struggle by China's would-be rulers to unite and govern the all-but-ungovernable geographic mass of China. It is a story of centrifugal forces and of insurmountable divisions rooted in geography and history -- but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, of centripetal forces toward eventual unity.

This dynamism is not limited to China. The Scottish referendum and waves of secession movements -- from Spain's Catalonia to Turkey and Iraq's ethnic Kurds -- are working in different directions. More than half a century after World War II triggered a wave of post-colonial nationalism that changed the map of the world, buried nationalism and ethnic identity movements of various forms are challenging the modern idea of the inviolable unity of the nation-state.

Yet even as these sentiments pull on the loose threads of nations, in China, one of the most intractable issues in the struggle for unity -- the status of Tibet -- is poised for a possible reversal, or at least a major adjustment. The long-running but frequently unnoticed negotiations have raised the possibility that the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader, may be nearing a deal that would enable him to return to his Tibetan homeland. If it happens, it would end the Dalai Lama's exile in Dharamsala, India -- an exile that began after the Tibetan uprising in 1959, nine years after the People's Republic of China annexed Tibet. More important, a settlement between Beijing and the Dalai Lama could be a major step in lessening the physical and psychological estrangement between the Chinese heartland and the Tibetan Plateau.

The very existence of the Tibetan issue bespeaks several overlapping themes of Chinese geopolitics. Most fundamentally, it must be understood in the context of China's struggle to integrate and extend control over the often impassable but strategically significant borderlands militarily and demographically. These borderlands, stretching from northeast to the southwest -- Manchuria, Mongolian Plateau, Xinjiang, Tibet and the Yunnan Plateau -- form a shield, both containing and protecting a unified Han core from overland invasion. In attempting to integrate these regions, however, China confronts the very nature of geographic disintegration and the ethnic identities in these restive borderlands, which have sought to resist, separate or drift away from China at times when weak central power has diminished the coherence of China's interior.

Tibet in many ways represents the extreme edge of this pattern. Indeed, while the formidable geography of the Tibetan Plateau (its altitude averages 4.5 kilometers, or almost 2.8 miles, above sea level) largely inured it from most frontier threats to the Han core compared with the more accessible Manchuria, Mongolian Plateau or Xinjiang, perhaps no borderland is as fraught with as much consequence as Tibet under China's contemporary geopolitical circumstances. The Tibetan Plateau and its environs constitute

roughly one-quarter of the Chinese landmass and are a major source of freshwater for China, the Indian subcontinent and mainland Southeast Asia. The high mountains of the Himalayas make a natural buffer for the Chinese heartland and shape the complex geopolitical relationship between China and India.

Historically, China's engagement with the Tibetan Plateau has been lacking and not characterized by national unity. Starting in the 7th century, China made sporadic attempts to extend its reach into the Tibetan Plateau, but it wasn't until the Qing dynasty that the empire made a substantial effort to gain authority over Tibetan cultural and social structures through control of Tibetan Buddhist institutions. The weakening of China after the Qing dynasty led peripheral states, including Tibet, to slip from Chinese central rule.

Since the People's Republic of China began ruling over Tibet in 1950, the perennial struggle manifested as political, religious and psychological estrangement between political power in Beijing and the Dalai Lama, the charismatic political and spiritual symbol of the Tibetan self-determination movement, who consistently has resisted China's full domination over Tibet. Here, the nominally impersonal process of geopolitics confronts the rare individual who has a lasting impact. The Dalai Lama has concentrated the Tibetan cause into himself and his image. It is the Dalai Lama who represents the Tibetan identity in foreign capitals and holds a fractious Tibetan movement together, holding sway over both indigenous Tibetans in the homeland and the old and new generations of Tibetan exiles.

#### Perennial Struggle and Contemporary Moves

Under the People's Republic, China has some of the clearest physical control and central authority over one of the largest and most secure states in China's dynastic history. However, the ancient compulsion to secure the Chinese periphery did not go unaddressed by China's Communist leadership.

Over the years, the central government has pushed aggressively to bolster Han Chinese economic and demographic dominance over the borderland while attempting to overcome the physical barriers of distance through grandiose infrastructure projects, including road and rail links. And yet, the estrangement with the Dalai Lama has left Beijing dealing with the perception that its control over the Tibetan Plateau is partial and of questionable legitimacy. Meanwhile, the Dalai Lama's international prestige exposed the central power in Beijing to numerous international critics. Moreover, it offered New Delhi an opportunity to exploit Beijing's concerns by hosting the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile.

Beijing sees no space to allow the autonomy demanded by the Tibetan exile movement; it is a short path from robust autonomy to direct challenge. Beijing's strategy has been to try to undermine the Dalai Lama's international prestige, constrain interaction between the exile community and Tibetans at home and hope that when the spiritual leader dies, the absence of his strong personality will leave the Tibetan movement without a center and without someone who can draw the international attention the Dalai Lama does. Central to Beijing's calculation is interference in the succession process whereby Beijing claims

the right to designate the Dalai Lama's religious successor and, in doing so, exploit sectarian and factional divisions within Tibetan Buddhism. Beijing insists the reincarnation process must follow the Tibetan religious tradition since the Qing dynasty, meaning that it must occur within Tibetan territory and with the central government's endorsement, a process that highlights Tibet's position as a part of China, not an independent entity.

Beijing's plan could work, but the cost would be high. Without recognition from the Dalai Lama, Beijing's appointed successor -- and by extension, Beijing's authority in Tibet -- can hardly be accepted by the wider Tibetan community. To resist Beijing's attempt at interference, the Dalai Lama has in recent years made various statements signaling that the ancient traditions of the succession process could break. In particular, the Dalai Lama has discussed the potential for succession through emanation rather than reincarnation. This would place his knowledge and authority in several individuals, each with a part of his spiritual legacy, but none as the single heir. Emanation can occur while the Dalai Lama is alive, thus giving him the ability to manage a transition. He has also mentioned the possibility that no successor will be named -- that the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama will end, leaving his legacy as the lasting focus for Tibetans.

More concretely, the Dalai Lama has split the role of spiritual and political leadership of the Tibetan movement, nominally giving up the latter while retaining the former. In doing so, he is attempting to create a sense of continuity to the Tibetan movement even though his spiritual successor has not been identified. However, it also separates the Dalai Lama from any Tibetan political movement, theoretically making it easier for the spiritual leader and Beijing to come to an accord about his possible return as a spiritual -- but not political -- leader. But the maneuvering by the Dalai Lama reflects a deeper reality. The Tibetan movement is not homogenous. Tibetan Buddhism has several schools that remain in fragile coordination out of respect for the Dalai Lama. The Tibetan political movement is also fragmented, with the younger foreign-born Tibetans often more strongly pressing for independence for Tibet, while the older exiles take a more moderate tone and call for more autonomy. The peaceful path promoted by the Dalai Lama is respected, but not guaranteed forever, by the younger and more radical elements of the Tibetan movement, which have only temporarily renounced the use of violence to achieve their political goals.

The future of the Tibetan movement after the Dalai Lama's death is uncertain. At a minimum, the spiritual leader's fame means no successor will be able to exercise the same degree of influence or maintain internal coherence as he has done. Just as the Dalai Lama was concerned that an extremist wing of the new Tibetan generation would undermine his moderate ideology and dilute the movement's legitimacy, Beijing fears that the post-Dalai Lama era would enable multiple radical, separatist or even militant movements to proliferate, leaving Beijing in a much more difficult position and potentially facing a greater security threat.

Beijing and the Dalai Lama have shown a willingness to reach a political settlement in the past, but their attempts failed. As uncertainties loom for both sides amid concerns

about the spiritual leader's age and the changing domestic dynamics facing China's new president, Xi Jinping, both sides could see a departure from previous hostilities as a reasonable step toward a low-cost settlement. In other words, both Beijing and the Dalai Lama -- and by extension his mainstream followers -- understand how little time they have and how, without a resolution, the uncertainties surrounding the Tibet issue could become permanent after the spiritual leader's death.

Optimism Now, but Caution Ahead

The report of the Dalai Lama's possible return to Tibet comes as Beijing has resumed talks with representatives of the spiritual leader. This round of negotiations comes after nine rounds of failed talks over the past decade and four years after the last attempt. Nonetheless, the mood appears at least somewhat optimistic on both sides. In recent weeks, the Dalai Lama has offered conciliatory comments about Xi and intimated that he could be open to returning to Tibet, a longstanding desire of the 79-year-old spiritual leader. For its part, Beijing has released some Tibetan political prisoners and reportedly allowed the Dalai Lama's image and words to be used in certain Tibetan regions after years of prohibition.

Of course, many uncertainties surround the return of the Dalai Lama; it is even uncertain whether it could happen at all. Indeed, overcoming 55 years of hostile relations takes enormous effort, and even if the Dalai Lama is allowed to return to Tibet, it is only one of several steps in much broader negotiations between Beijing and the Tibetan exile community over how to reach a resolution, including the possible resettlement of 200,000 Tibetans in exile, the status of the government-in-exile, the authority of the Dalai Lama and, ultimately, the succession process for the spiritual leader.

Over the years, the Dalai Lama repeatedly has expressed a strong desire to return to the Tibetan homeland, seeing it as an end goal in his longstanding efforts to gain Tibetan autonomy. Although Beijing had always left the option open, it repeatedly emphasized that any dialogue with the Dalai Lama would be confined to the scope of an arrangement for the spiritual leader and would carry no political implications. In other words, any agreement will be based on the premise that expanded Tibetan autonomy is not an option and that Beijing's authority over Tibetan regions -- and by extension, the borderland in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia -- will remain intact. Similarly, the Dalai Lama will not accept a weakening of his spiritual authority among the Tibetan community or of his role in choosing successors. Nonetheless, with Beijing's concern over the proliferation of radical wings of the Tibetan movement abroad, allowing the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet could mitigate some of the tension and give Beijing a way to divide and weaken the Tibetan movement.

In moving toward an agreement, both sides would have to prepare for some political risk. For Beijing, the foremost concern would be managing the enormous religious influence of the Dalai Lama at home, where he is seen as a challenger to the Communist Party's political leadership. For the Dalai Lama, the main concerns would be managing the role of the Tibetan political leadership overseas and the potential repercussions within the

exile movement from the developing settlement's contrast with their goal for Tibetan autonomy.

Perhaps more important, even if there were signs of a resolution developing, the succession issue is likely to be a roadblock. Beijing is unlikely to give any concession in its authority to appoint a reincarnated spiritual leader, and the Dalai Lama shows little intention of allowing Beijing's unilateral move.

#### Confronting a Geopolitical Curse

Despite various uncertainties, questions and risks, the potential ramifications of even the slim possibility of rapprochement illustrate China's ancient geopolitical dynamism at work.

Again illustrating how an individual can play a role in geopolitics, the potential for reconciliation between Beijing and the Dalai Lama could affect the balance between China and India. China has long viewed India's decision to host the Tibetan government-in-exile as a hostile gesture. However, India's ability to exploit China's concerns about Tibet has diminished along with the government-in-exile's influence and claim to represent Tibet as a legitimate entity. Already, New Delhi has shown waning enthusiasm for accepting Tibetan refugees and greater concern that the internal fragmentation of the Tibetan community will make hosting the exile community more of a liability than a benefit. However, a settlement would not eliminate the underlying geopolitical rivalry between India and China on other fronts -- from their 4,000-kilometer land border to the maritime competitions in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea and their competition for energy and other resources.

Even if a settlement on the Tibet issue emerges in the distant future, it does not mean the end of the China-Tibet struggle. Indeed, since 2009 there have been many Tibetan self-immolations, and Beijing's economic developments in many parts of the ethnic borderlands widely are perceived as flawed or incomplete. Quite likely, a detente with the Dalai Lama will result in radicalized and more extremist elements emerging overseas, seeking self-determination and, like many of their counterparts around the world -- from Scotland to the Kurds in the Middle East -- challenging the centripetal forces of nation-states.

Historically, when Han China is strong, so is its control over these buffer regions. Control of the buffer regions, in turn, is a key precondition for a strong and secure Han China. This arrangement will become crucial as Beijing grapples with the potential challenges in the social, economic and political transformation in the Han core in the coming years. Therefore, despite the flux mentioned in the aphorism from Romance of the Three Kingdoms, for Beijing the ultimate goal is to confront an ancient geopolitical curse by cementing its control over its borderlands and uniting China permanently and irreversibly, however unrealistic this goal might be.