

## How the war on terror has left the Dalai Lama in the lurch

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*China's rise as a global power has made Tibet's fight for independence less appealing to the Western world, reports Jasper Becker*

Radiating smiles and beatitude, the 14th Dalai Lama is back in Britain on his endless peregrination around the world's capitals and will probably hear the usual pious but insincere expressions of support.

As China looms ever larger in the world, European leaders are increasingly shunning the Buddhist monk and the cause of Tibetan independence grows dimmer. In France where the Dalai Lama passed through, President Jacques Chirac has not met him since 1998.

In Germany, Chancellor Gerhard Shroeder has never dared meet him in the five years since he took office although his junior coalition partners, the Green Party were once vociferous in demanding full independence for Tibet.

In Britain, Tony Blair - who met him in 1999 - has not found time in his schedule for another meeting, provoking questions in Parliament. The Prime Minister responded by denying he was avoiding him. "I've actually met the Dalai Lama on previous occasions. I'll be very happy to meet him again on subsequent occasions," he said.

"As for the issue of Tibet, which is a matter of concern to MPs on all sides of the House, this is an issue we raise constantly with the Chinese - most recently on the visit of Premier Wen, when we had a significant and long discussion on Tibet," he continued.

Alison Reynolds of the Free Tibet campaign group attacked the decision. "Given the world's pre-occupation with the 'War on Terror' it seems extraordinary that the Prime Minister would pass up the chance to meet the most prominent man of peace," she said. "Britain, more than any other western country, has a longstanding relationship with Tibet and should therefore be at the forefront of efforts to promote an end to China's present day occupation of Tibet."

The Dalai Lama will however meet Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Prince Charles and has been invited to visit the Scottish Parliament. Another factor is China's economic boom, and the desperation of Western leaders to stay on side with Beijing, so that businesses continue to enjoy the good times.

A Nobel Peace prize winner and the world's most famous advocate of non-violence, the Dalai Lama ought to have found his standing rising in a world obsessed with the War on Terror but though he remains universally admired, he is on the contrary increasingly ignored.

The Tibetan issue has gradually faded from prominence and the Dalai Lama's demands have shrunk in the past 20 years from full independence to not much more than a plea for tolerance and autonomy.

China is trying hard to make him an international non-person, the way it has succeeded in doing with the leadership of Taiwan. Even the United States does not dare officially to allow President Chen Shui-bian permission to enter the country for fear of offending Beijing except on a transit visa.

With Beijing's blessing European Union representatives such as Chris Patten or Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson, are happy to meet a tyrant like North Korean leader Kim Jong Il responsible for the deaths of millions. Yet they have all ostracised President Chen, a democratically elected leader of a prosperous and peaceful state.

Until now, the Dalai Lama has been saved from a similar fate by his unique status as both a spiritual guru and as the political leader of the Tibetan government-in-exile. Yet on present trends, the Dalai Lama will no longer be received at the highest levels for much longer.

All of China's neighbours have given in to Chinese pressure and refused to allow him in on anything resembling an official visit. Even countries with a strong Buddhist tradition - South Korea, Japan, Thailand, Mongolia and Burma have all rejected visits or declined to accord him the protocol his rank had hitherto commanded..

Russia is insisting that there can be no official meetings even though it is now considering letting him in to perform religious pastoral duties for his followers.

India, home to the Tibetan exile government, is being forced to reconsider its position as Beijing and New Delhi are drawn together by economic interests.

Last year Nepal, the chief conduit for the thousands of refugees who flee the country every year, suddenly reversed its tolerant policy and began handing over the escapees to the custody of the Chinese embassy in Kathmandu. Only after intensive pressure did it stop this and resume allowing the refugees to be handled by UN High Commission for Refugees. Outside a few small countries in Europe, the Dalai Lama's remaining hold out is in North America. President Bush has not hesitated to invite him to the White House on two occasions and Congress continues to pass motions supportive of Tibetan rights.

This month the Dalai Lama spent 19 days touring Canada attracting huge crowds and the support of pop stars like Alanis Morissette. In Ottawa, Paul Martin became the first Canadian premier to meet the Dalai Lama, defying protests by China and the fears of the powerful Canadian business community. Even so it was only a brief meeting which the Canadians stressed was only about religion

Beijing routinely threatens to punish those that deny its edicts. Chinese officials threatened to strip Liverpool of its status as a twin city to Shanghai unless it withdrew its invitation to the Dalai Lama. In China, the Dalai Lama continues to vilified in a stream of propaganda and those who show their support for him by openly displaying his photograph risk long prison terms.

"The destiny and future of Tibet can no longer be decided by the Dalai Lama and his clique. Rather, it can only be decided by the whole Chinese nation, including the Tibetan people," said a White Paper issued last week by Beijing.

"This is an objective political fact in Tibet that cannot be denied or shaken." The 30-page white paper, released by the Information Office of the State Council robustly rejected the Dalai Lama's offer to accept a limited autonomy.

"It is hoped that the Dalai Lama will look reality in the face, make a correct judgment of the situation, truly relinquish his stand for 'Tibet independence', and do something beneficial to the progress of China and the region of Tibet in his remaining years," said the document entitled Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Tibet.

Even though the Dalai Lama has officially declared he is no longer seeking independence and would keep Tibet inside China, all this suggests he is never going to allowed back to Tibet and may never be welcomed in Beijing. Since 1995, he has pressed to make a pilgrimage to the holy mountain of Wutaishan in north-west China as a way of getting talks started. Such a visit seemed highly possible during US President Bill Clinton's visit to China in 1998.

At 68, and in exile for 45 years, the Dalai Lama cannot have many years left to carrying on his peregrinations and some analysts suspect the Chinese are only waiting for him to die in order to replace him with a candidate of their own.

After the 10th Panchen Lama died almost 14 years ago, the Chinese rejected the Dalai Lama's choice of his successor and seized the boy and his family. Instead Beijing appointed their own candidate who will one day probably be called upon to lead the Tibetans during the period until a new Dalai Lama is recognised and reaches adulthood.

The pace of Chinese immigration has stepped up and will be further boosted when the first railway line linking Tibet to the rest of China opens in a few years.

Certainly, the hopes which flared among Tibetans during the 1980s when Beijing opened indirect negotiations with the Dalai Lama and faced down an uprising which started in Lhasa have now faded. The unrest was stamped out after 1989 when Lhasa was put under martial law by the current President of China, Hu Jintao. At least 800 Tibetans were arrested, many of them monks and nuns, and given long prison sentences. Even 15 years on - by official accounts - more than 145 Tibetans serving terms for political crimes.

"China is not yet ready to seriously discuss more freedoms for Tibet," the Dalai Lama observed during his tour of Canada but he said he was confident that "democracy, rule of law, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, open information - these things will come."

The Dalai Lama's best hope now rests with Washington. He emerged from the White House last autumn saying that Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell had shown "interest and genuine sympathy" for Tibet.

A White House spokesman said: "The president reiterated the strong commitment of the US to the preservation of Tibet's unique religious, cultural and linguistic identity and the protection of the human rights of all Tibetans."

Optimists believe that as relations between Washington and Beijing have warmed after China entered the World Trade Organisation and the US was no longer threatening trade sanctions on human rights issues, China has been more willing to start a dialogue with the Tibetans. Yet despite strong support from the US, the dialogue has made little or no progress.

Instead the Chinese government is intent on tightening its grip over the Tibetans by launching new campaigns targeting the Dalai Lama's followers across the country. In October 2003, another monk, Nyima Dragpa died, reportedly as a result of repeated torture while serving a nine-year sentence for advocating Tibetan independence.

## 54 YEARS IN TIBET

1950: Chinese Army invades.

1951: Tibet becomes a "national autonomous region" under Dalai Lama's rule. Actual control held by Chinese Communist Party.

1959: Tibetans launch an armed separatist revolt, which is suppressed. Dalai Lama flees to India with 80,000 followers, establishes a "government-in-exile".

1965: Tibetan Autonomous Region formally established.

1966: Cultural Revolution begins in China. Red Guards take Tibetan capital of Lhasa. Religious practices banned, at least 4,000 monasteries destroyed.

1976: Religious ban lifted.

1989: China imposes martial law. Tibet's "government-in-exile" disbands.

1991: China agrees to hold talks with exiled leaders.

1999: Beijing rules Tibet an "inseparable part of China" and Dalai Lama must drop demands for independence.

May 2004: Dalai Lama in UK Tony Blair refuses to meet.