



# SINO-TIBETAN DIALOGUE



*Lodi Gyari, former Special Envoy of the Dalai Lama, meets Wang Zhaoguo, Vice-Chairman of the Chinese National People's Political Consultative Committee in Beijing in September 2002*

**In September 2002, following renewed contact, the envoys of the Dalai Lama arrived in Beijing to take part in what could be considered the most serious round of Sino-Tibetan talks since the early 1990s.**

Since the mid-1970s, the Dalai Lama has been talking of a solution for Tibet within the People's Republic of China, which subsequently came to be known as the Middle Way Approach. Following direct contact with the Chinese leadership, the Dalai Lama has sought to achieve genuine autonomy for Tibetans within the People's Republic of China. An official articulation of the Dalai Lama's Middle Way Approach came about through years of discussion by the Tibetan leadership. When the then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping conveyed his offer to the Dalai Lama that except independence, all other issues can be resolved through negotiations, the Tibetan side responded positively.<sup>1</sup> While the idea of political independence is pervasive

among Tibetans, the Dalai Lama has maintained that it is to the interest of both the Tibetan and the Chinese people that there be a solution within the framework of the People's Republic of China. Over the protracted course of Sino-Tibetan engagement, the Dalai Lama has elaborated his political vision in various ways, and has remained committed to the core principle of pursuing autonomy rather than outright independence.

Central to the Tibetan position is the political right of autonomy provided to all Tibetans living in contiguous Tibetan areas, an area roughly defined by the geography of the Tibetan plateau, governed by a single administrative unit under a single unified policy. According to the Chinese government's own analysis of its law on regional ethnic autonomy, the Tibetan people are entitled to the full political right of autonomy: full decision-making power in economic and social development undertakings; freedom to inherit

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see the Dalai Lama's message on the Middle Way Approach at <http://dalailama.com/messages/middle-way-approach>



# SINO-TIBETAN DIALOGUE



and develop traditional culture and to practice religious belief; freedom to administer, protect and be the first to utilize natural resources; and freedom to independently develop educational and cultural undertakings.

The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was set up by the Chinese government in 1965. Surrounding areas on the Tibetan plateau, now incorporated into Chinese provinces, have also been designated by the government as Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties. However, Tibetan autonomy that is currently being implemented by China has failed to deliver genuine autonomy to Tibetans.

The first round of the dialogue took place in September 2002 when the envoys of the Dalai Lama met in Beijing with Chinese officials responsible for Tibet policy. This was the first face-to-face meeting between the two counterparts since the beginning of the 1990s. A four-member Tibetan delegation headed by the Special Envoy of the Dalai Lama, Lodi Gyari, met the Chinese leadership on September 9, 2002. On the Chinese side the dialogue was conducted on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by officials of the United Front Work Department (UFWD).

For the Tibetan side the purpose of the visit was twofold: on one hand, to re-establish direct contacts with the leadership in Beijing and create a conducive atmosphere for direct face-to-face meetings on a regular basis; on the other one, to explain the Dalai Lama's Middle Way Approach towards resolving the issue of Tibet.

Support for meaningful, substantive dialogue between the two sides came not only externally from governments and heads of state, but increasingly from within China. Public awareness of the Sino-Tibetan dialogue, although limited, created a new space for discussion of Tibet. One document circulating among Chinese Party officials stated: *"Anyone who thinks the Tibet issue should be dragged on until after the death of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama is naïve, unwise, and [supporting] the wrong policy."*

While the Tibetan leadership in exile was cautiously optimistic about the significance of the start of a new phase of dialogue, the Chinese government sent mixed signals. On one hand it showed openness to the dialogue, but on the other one it declined to publicly acknowledge the visit's political nature and that discussions were even taking place.

Eight further rounds took place from September 2002 to January 2010<sup>2</sup>. Already after the third round, in a statement issued on October 13, 2004, Special Envoy Lodi Gyari stated: *"It was apparent from discussions that there are major differences on a number of issues, including some fundamental ones. Both sides acknowledge the need for more substantive discussions in order to narrow down the gaps and reach a common ground"*.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this round was still described as *"the most extensive and serious to date"* by the Tibetan delegation. The decrease in optimism became even more evident after the fifth round when Lodi Gyari stated that there was *"a major difference even in the approach in addressing the issue"*.

During the seventh round, the Chinese side presented the Tibetan delegation with new preconditions for the Dalai Lama to satisfy, which it called *"the four no supports"*:

1. *No support for activities that aimed to disturb and sabotage the Beijing Olympic games;*
2. *No support for and making no attempt to conspire and incite violent criminal activities;*
3. *No support for and taking earnest steps to check the violent terrorist activities of the Tibetan Youth Congress; and*
4. *No support for any propositions or activities that sought to achieve "Tibet independence" and split the motherland."*<sup>4</sup>

In his press statement following the seventh round, Lodi Gyari rejected the necessity of these preconditions, asserting that the Dalai Lama's positions already

<sup>2</sup> May 2003, September 2004, June 2005, February 2006, June 2007, June 2008 and October 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *The Sino-Tibetan Dialogue. Talk Shop or Path to Resolution?*, R. Kamm, Oberlin College, April 2012, [https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send\\_file?accession=oberlin1340040517&disposition=inline](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file?accession=oberlin1340040517&disposition=inline)



# SINO-TIBETAN DIALOGUE



satisfied them.

During that round of dialogue, the UFWD Head Du Qinglin explicitly invited suggestions from the Dalai Lama for the stability and development of Tibet, and asked him to submit his views on the degree or form of autonomy he was seeking.

During the eighth round of the dialogue, in 2008, the Dalai Lama's envoys presented the "Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People".<sup>5</sup> This document is a detailed elaboration of the Dalai Lama's position, which is compatible with the PRC Constitution and the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law (REAL).

The Memorandum outlined the need for all Tibetan areas (comprising the TAR and Tibetan provinces in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces) to be brought under a single administrative unit, and invoked articles in both the PRC Constitution and REAL that could support such a change.

The Chinese side rejected and denounced the Memorandum as a disguised form of independence. In a press statement it stressed that "*at no time under no circumstances*" would China tolerate "*the slightest wavering or deviation*" on the issue of "*safeguarding national unification and territorial integrity*." On 10 November 2008, UFWD deputy head Zhu Weiqun framed the Memorandum as an attempt "*to deny, restrict and weaken the powers of the Central authorities*."

The ninth and final round in January 2010 confirmed the lack of progress of the dialogue. The Dalai Lama's two envoys met with UFWD Head Du Qinglin and deputy head Zhu Weiqun, and submitted a note to the Memorandum<sup>6</sup> addressing Chinese concerns of the proposal. In a press conference following the ninth

round, Zhu rejected the note, and reiterated the refusal to discuss anything but the Dalai Lama's personal status.

As a result, the current impasse in the dialogue has been the longest since talks resumed in 2002. February 2015 marked the passage of five years since the last round in 2010.

In 2014, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) launched a new campaign on the Middle Way Approach (MWA) – Umaylam in Tibetan.<sup>7</sup> Through this campaign, the CTA aimed to give more visibility to the MWA.

In April 2015, the Chinese Government came out with the latest White Paper on Tibet that had a separate section on the Middle Way Approach. The White Paper, in an apparent reference to the CTA campaign, said, "In recent years, it has intensified its efforts to promote this "middle way" and to disguise it." It also said, "As a political strategy for achieving independence through a series of steps, the "middle way" does not tally with China's history, national reality, state Constitution, laws and basic systems."

The State Department, in its annual report to the Congress on the status of Tibet negotiations, highlighted the fact that there had been no dialogue between the Tibetans and the Chinese since January 2010. It said that resolving the problems facing Tibetans is in the interest of the Chinese government and the Tibetan people, adding, "Failure to address these problems will lead to greater tensions inside China and will be an impediment to China's social and economic development, and will continue to be a stumbling block to fuller political and economic engagement with the United States."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The full text of the Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy is available at: <http://www.savetibet.org/policy-center/memorandum-on-genuine-autonomy-for-the-tibetan-people/>

<sup>6</sup> The full text of the Note on the Memorandum is available at <http://www.savetibet.org/policy-center/note-on-the-memorandum-on-genuine-autonomy-for-the-tibetan-people/>

<sup>7</sup> The website of the campaign is available at <http://mwa.tibet.net>

<sup>8</sup> US Government believes "resumption of dialogue" on Tibet is "critical", ICT, April 17, 2015. <https://www.savetibet.org/us-government-believes-resumption-of-dialogue-on-tibet-is-critical/#sthash.hbp8X2TO.dpuf>