

Is a new Cold War looming?

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Is a new Cold War looming?

In the Tibetan crisis, a global conflict with China is brewing, which no one seeks to prevent, writes Antje Vollmer

I

Each generation evidently needs its own war before it is sufficiently capable and wise to learn the lessons of war. That applies to hot as well as to cold wars. The last Cold War ended in a comprehensive 'victory', which held the whole world spellbound, for Western democracies and Western values and for ideals that essentially embodied the lessons learned from the era of the two World Wars. It did not take another ten years before a new 'hot' war was declared, namely the war on terror. The trigger for that war – not its root cause – lay in the events of 11 September 2001. Was that declaration of war the only way to respond to the atrocity, to the revulsion and the profound grief that was shared by the whole world? No. Can this war on terror be won by force of arms? Again, the answer is 'no'. Even before they can learn the lessons from their foreseeable defeat, however, Western governments and societies are already starting to prepare for a new Cold War, namely the war of minds against China, a country that is in the process of becoming a global power. Already embroiled in an ideological confrontation with the Islamic and Arabic countries, which are not exactly sparsely populated, and having manoeuvred ourselves into a state of permanent confrontation, at least on a diplomatic level, with Russia, are we now heading for a general clash of systems with China into the bargain? One in five of the world's population is Chinese. The West clearly has plenty of bravado!

II

Raging protest against China and passionate commitment to the Tibetan cause currently form the highest common factor between Western power politics, Western yearnings and Western media strategies. In this united front, we see George Bush alongside Hillary Clinton, Angela Merkel side by side with Nicolas Sarkozy and the analytical news magazine Der Spiegel making common cause with the Bild tabloid, all of them ultimately singing from the same hymn sheet as Hollywood, the civil-rights activists and the esotericists. Behind this unity lie great aims, namely human rights, freedom of the press and freedom of expression and the preservation of a magnificent ancient culture, as well as genuine enthusiasm for the truly enchanting and often charismatic leadership figure of the Tibetans, the Dalai Lama. Whether this highest common factor, however, has even the slightest chance of achieving its aims may be seriously doubted. Experience, after all, has taught us that a clear-cut division of the world into rogue states, plotters and Satans on the one hand and noble statesmen, philanthropists and freedom-lovers on the other rarely squares with reality.

The tragedy of the Tibet issue is that there really was some justifiable hope – albeit only a glimmer – that the pride of the Chinese in their Olympics and their associated honourable return to the international fold could be coupled with diplomatic pressure and that this combination of circumstances might permit a timely resolution of the Tibetan question against all the odds. The damage, however, has already been done. The vital opportunity was not grasped in time. That could be foreseen last summer when, instead of a massive intensification of the secret talks between the Chinese and the Tibetans, the Dalai Lama embarked on his flashlight tour, which took him from the Capitol in Washington to Angela Merkel's Chancellery to a meeting with the Canadian Prime Minister and so on. At that time, when there should have been complete silence, so that some genuine substantive progress could be made, the Tibetan question became a pop sensation. The political solution dissolved in the media frenzy and in fits of outrage from which it is difficult to return to the politics of common sense.

III

What shape might a political solution have taken? The key to such a solution has never lain in Washington or in Berlin but only ever in Beijing. The practical problem is how to persuade the political leaders of a country of 1.3 billion people to grant more freedom and greater cultural autonomy to a tiny percentage of their population, namely 0.46% - for that is precisely the size of the Tibetan population in relation to the whole Chinese nation. It is nothing short of illusory to imagine that Western governments would go to the brink of a real war for that purpose, as has occasionally been the case over Taiwan. It is just as much of an illusion to hope that the Chinese would be more willing to talk if they were forced into an undignified climbdown, lost face and were humiliated before the whole world. Negotiation, in short, would have been the only option and could have been based on either of two conceptual models:

1. China could have enacted religious laws, as is customary in other states, legally guaranteeing freedom of worship and allowing religious communities to choose their own leaders, to train their religious functionaries and to own monasteries and temples. In return, the religious communities would accept the laws of the land and integrate into all the pro-democracy and emancipation movements and into the reform movements that still abound in Chinese civil society today. The Dalai Lama would then be a spiritual leader and a citizen. As far as I know, this method of separating church and state, religion and politics, was rejected not only by the Chinese side but also by the Tibetans. It was, they claimed, 'inconsistent with their traditions'.

2. The second model is known as 'one country, two systems'. This model was thrashed out in lengthy negotiations between British and Chinese diplomats as the condition for the return of Hong Kong to Greater China. In spite of some difficulties and sporadic setbacks, it has worked surprisingly well. It came about because China's motivation to secure the unity of the country was so powerful that the Chinese even consented to the preservation of democratic structures. Understandably, the Tibetan Government in Exile hopes to secure the adoption of a similar model for Tibet. An objective analysis shows, however, that this is equally illusory, at least for the time being, for the following two reasons:

Firstly, British troops were in Hong Kong, and the crown colony was not part of China. Secondly, the negotiations on the 'one country, two systems' model could be conducted between the Governments of

the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China by diplomats, and the talks continued for almost a decade behind the scenes, without public denunciations and humiliations.

No one who is genuinely attached to the preservation of Tibetan culture and truly seeks the return of the Dalai Lama should nurture any illusions.

IV

Why were there no serious negotiations on either of these solutions?

- The Chinese leaders misjudged their position at home and abroad. Their foreign policy was based on the assumption that the West, for reasons of global strategy, would not – or not yet – be seeking confrontation with China, since the Western nations, being embroiled in the war on terror and confronted by serious globalisation problems, could have little interest in completely destabilising China into the bargain. They also believed that the steady increase in economic cooperation would reinforce the sense of global economic and

commercial interdependence to such an extent that the West would not risk outright confrontation with China over Tibet. Lastly, the reformist faction relied on there being so much respect in the West for the incredible progress of the reform process and for the formidable challenge posed by the transition from the Maoist Stone Age to modern turbo-capitalism that diplomacy and reason would prevail, even in a political crisis. China vastly underestimated the ability of Western media-driven societies to generate collective hysteria and a pervasive sense of outrage. Within its own borders, it has always failed to appreciate that, however impressively living standards might rise, they cannot quench the thirst for freedom which exists among China's more and more highly educated elite.

- The US Administration, and especially George Bush, on the other hand, soon recognised that the Tibetan issue could be a sure-fire way to mobilise world opinion against China and thus relaunch old anti-Communist strategies – which, moreover, could be pursued without any material repercussions. In this way, Tibet would be a trump card up the President's sleeve, a card that could come in useful in the future confrontation that would presumably develop with an emerging rival for global power. There can be no doubt that, if the new China followed up its economic reforms by tackling democratic reform, it would have the potential to become a superpower.

- Europe's failure to grasp the unique opportunity to mediate in good time with a view to achieving a negotiated solution is a small tragedy within the larger one. Since the announcement in the summer of 2001 that China was to host the 2008 Olympic Games and until perhaps the spring of this year, but no later, this opportunity was there for the taking, if only even one European government had used quiet diplomacy in a serious effort to bring about a realistic solution, applying sufficient pressure on the Chinese while maintaining an adequate distance from the views of the Tibetan government in exile. From the time of Angela Merkel's reception of the Dalai Lama, if not before, it became clear that Europe was milking the Tibet issue for domestic plaudits rather than focusing on a political solution. Yet it was precisely the Germans, possibly in tandem with the British, who would have enjoyed the sort of goodwill that could not emerge in direct talks between the Chinese Government and the Tibetan Government in Exile.

- There have also been misjudgements and omissions on the part of the exiled Tibetans. It is a common phenomenon that exiles make stiffer and sometimes more unrealistic demands than members of the resident population. Living in exile invariably distances people from conditions at home, however passionately they may be committed to their cause. It is the language of propaganda to speak of 'cultural genocide' in present-day Tibet, thereby presenting today's China as something akin to the Nazi dictatorship. It is also factually inaccurate. Although it is brutal reality, some cultures are able to be maintained more rigorously and self-assertively when struggling against marginalisation by a large foreign population than when subject to the effects of globalisation. Much of what people in Tibet are rightly bemoaning happened long ago across the border in Nepal as a result of globalisation, modernisation and all the manifestations of state failure without the world taking any notice. Sikkim and Ladakh have disappeared, swamped by Indian culture, and when the King of Sikkim died in house arrest, in which he was being held by the Indian Government, there was no wave of global protest. Many of those phenomena which affect the cultural and religious life of a nation and which we rightly deplore in Tibet are the result of that turbo-capitalist modernisation to which the whole of Asia is currently subject and with which China is torturing itself.

It would have been all the more important to make every effort – and I do mean every effort – to ensure that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan religious leaders, as the central focus of Tibetan religion and culture, returned home, and with them the entire intelligentsia from its exile in the West, where a second generation has already grown up. The cultural situation in Tibet was better when the Panchen Lama still lived in the country, though he lived there under heavy pressure. At the time he was regarded by the exiled Tibetans as a 'collaborator', although they later accepted him as a holy man. In recent years, however, the last Buddhist intellectuals as well as monastic leaders and finally the last remaining authority in Tibet, the Karmapa Lama, have moved to Dharamsala in India. This has left Tibet in religious terms as a flock without shepherds. One might well ask whether that was the right strategy for a successful struggle within Tibet.

How differently processes can operate when the leading religious and intellectual figures do remain in their own country is illustrated by the only inspiring example in the region, namely that of Bhutan. In that country it was ultimately the King himself, highly educated in both Western democratic ideals and the Buddhist religion, who instructed his people in the ways of democracy. This amazing feat took place far from the eyes of the world, with so little Hollywood-style glamorisation and jet-set attention that the Western media did not do one single interview with the King. Instead, Bhutan is now democratic.

- The most desperate figure in this whole circus is the Dalai Lama himself. He has gone to the brink of exhaustion, to the limits of his capacity, to take his people's cause to all parts of the world and especially to the centres of government. He himself has long been aware that media campaigns, inflaming public passions and politicians' soundbites will not resolve his people's plight. One day he may actually turn his back on all the honours awarded to him, the fawning and activists and return to live beyond the Himalayas as a simple monk so that he can at least spend his final days with his own people. How free he would be to do that I do not know.

V

What still needs to be done?

The most urgent task at the moment is to harness this huge mass of worldwide energy generated by the Tibet issue into a face-saving proposal to which a reformist Government in Beijing is able to subscribe. The current campaign, including China's loss of face throughout the world, is strengthening those nationalists in China who have never given a fig for global public opinion. It is strengthening the faint-hearted who maintain that free societies are incompatible with Chinese tradition. By the same token, it is weakening the reformers, eroding the respect they have won for their remarkable achievements to date and sapping their courage and their support for the tasks that still lie ahead.

Let the diplomats examine whether there is still a chance to try out the two conceptual models – either the return of the Dalai Lama on the basis of negotiated religious laws or even the 'two states, one country' model. The course of the Olympics will help in no small way to determine whether that chance is still there for the taking.

A few days ago another great reformer, Mikhail Gorbachev, to whom Germany owes so much, summed up his own experience in a very enlightened, embittered and objective analysis presented to a small group of people. He said, "I listened to the dissidents. In the end, their voices were ringing in my own head. We in the Soviet Union, we as Russians, and I personally, took one of the greatest risks that political leaders can take, namely to question our own *raison d'être*. We did so in the hope that the whole world would be transformed after the Cold War and seek a new, more peaceful order. The remarkable thing was that there were no longer any dissidents who made that same demand of the more fortunate part of the world when the latter saw the end of the Cold War as nothing more than a triumph and as a victory for one side in the war between the two systems. I am still waiting for dissidents who can summon up as much courage when dealing with their own governments".

The underlying message is surely that the West is partly to blame for the resurgence of authoritarianism in Russia. The same thing could happen in China, with far more serious consequences for stability and peace in the world.

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