

The US-China Power Struggle, Two Decades of CIA Interference in Tibet

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Of relevance to the crisis in US-China relations, we bring to the attention of our readers this incisive historical analysis of CIA interference in Tibet by Shawn Quinn, first published in January 2020

America's position as the world's strongest country faces its greatest challenge today from China, as is widely acknowledged. Yet the United States-China power struggle is not merely a phenomenon of this century, but has been ongoing for at least 70 years.

Following China's autumn 1949 communist revolution, the US has attempted in varying degrees to negate Beijing's influence and regional control in areas like Xinjiang and Tibet. It may be important to note that Tibet itself lies within China's official frontiers, and is located in the far south-west of the country.

Tibet comprises an ancient and idyllic region with landscapes too arid to support much human life, which very likely accounts for the surprising array of large animals there, more than anywhere else in China – from brown bears and foxes to wild horses. In size, Tibet is five times larger than the United Kingdom (UK), but is home to just three million people, about 30% of whom live in the capital Lhasa, and Buddhism is the primary religion of Tibetans.

Since China's revolution seven decades ago, the most serious armed challenge to have faced Beijing's authority came from Tibet. This culminated with terrible bloodshed in the March 1959 Tibetan uprising against Chinese government control – with Washington and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) strongly supporting the Tibetans – and which Beijing ended up crushing.

America's influence in Tibet can, in fact, be traced to as early as the second half of 1942, when the CIA's predecessor organisation – the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) – dispatched two of its secret agents to Tibet while America was tightening the screws on Imperial Japan. The OSS operatives' mission was to supply the Tibetan cabinet with "three fully-equipped portable wireless stations to set up a trans-Tibet network"; while another of their aims was to identify a corridor through Tibet from US ally India, that would allow easy access for American forces into Chinese territory.

The American agents were successful in "establishing friendly relations with the Tibetan authorities". William J. Donovan, the OSS chief and future "founding father of the CIA", recognised in a memorandum dated 12 April 1943 that Tibet "will be strategically valuable

in the future". Donovan [also revealed](#) that the current Dalai Lama received "a letter of greetings from the President of the United States", Franklin D. Roosevelt (1). At the time, the Dalai Lama was just seven years old, he is now 84.

The 1959 Tibetan revolt was [led by the](#) Dalai Lama's older brother, Gyalo Thondup, who for years had connections to Washington (2). Thondup, still alive and aged in his early 90s, lives in north-eastern India and he first travelled to the US in 1951, becoming a "top asset" of the CIA.

From the early 1950s, Thondup provided extensive details to the US Department of State, in return for guarantees that the American government would back strategies to "make Tibet independent" from China. Also as part of the deal, Thondup organised Tibetan guerrilla fighters who received large-scale training, arming and financial support from the CIA.

Immediately after the failed 1959 uprising the Dalai Lama, with CIA assistance, fled Tibet to northern India where he currently still resides. In the time following March 1959, around 80,000 Tibetan refugees joined the Dalai Lama by taking the arduous route to India.

The Dalai Lama's eldest brother, Thubten Jigme Norbu, had even stronger links to the Americans, and he was known as "the first Tibetan to settle in the US". Norbu moved to Washington in 1951, as a guest of the CIA-bankrolled broadcaster, Committee for Free Asia. Norbu was in effect a CIA agent for a time; and in 1953 he made contact with the CIA so as to seek covert aid and advice.

By 1956 both of the Dalai Lama's brothers, Thondup and Norbu, were part of a CIA program which gathered together a clandestine network of agents inside China's frontiers in Tibet. Thondup and Norbu were also assisting the CIA in the recruiting and training of Tibetan guerrillas, from the territory of Kham in eastern Tibet.

Norbu's name features in reports of covert CIA camps established in the United States, and also on the Pacific island of Saipan (3). By at least 1959, China's communist leader Mao Zedong was himself aware of the connection between the Dalai Lama's brothers and the CIA, which may have been a factor behind his harsh reactions to the uprisings.

The American author Tom Grunfeld, who has long specialised in Chinese and Tibetan history, wrote that "It was Gyalo Thondup who arranged the first CIA training missions, picking six Tibetans for that purpose". Grunfeld also notes, "Despite cries of innocence on the part of the Dalai Lama, officials in Washington were planning for the events months before that fateful March in 1959".

The insurgency in Tibet against Beijing's governance can be traced to the mid-1950s, and was even undergoing formulation within the borders of the United States. From early 1956, several revolts broke out in the Kham and Amdo regions of Tibet, which were encouraged by the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration.

Beginning in 1956, the CIA instituted a remarkable program whereby it flew up to 300 "Tibetan freedom fighters" all the way to the western US state of Colorado. This top secret initiative was overseen by the Tibetan-speaking CIA officer, Bruce Walker.

Walker conducted lengthy training exercises of these Tibetan commandos at Camp Hale, the remote Colorado US Army facility, situated almost 3,000 metres above sea level and

astride the Rocky Mountains. The CIA's training of Tibet's separatists continued at Camp Hale until it was closed in 1964. Less than 40 miles from Camp Hale, and also in Colorado, the CIA established a separate camp in the famous ski resort destination of Aspen.

The Brazilian historian and political scientist, Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, revealed that after completion of basic training at Camp Hale [Tibet's insurgents](#) "were subsequently transported in Curtiss C-46 Commando planes of the Intermountain Aviation and Intermountain Airways (a CIA airplane) and USAF" where, in extraordinary scenes reminiscent of a World War II airborne mission, they were then "parachuted above the mountains of Aspen where a secret base for the operations in China were established" (4).

In 1958 the CIA was also using its air bases in Thailand, south-east Asia, from where American aircraft flew northwards to the Kham area of eastern Tibet. US planes air-dropped modern weaponry and ammunition to ethnic-Tibetan regions of Kham (5). Another CIA command centre was built in New Delhi, India, where intensive monitoring of guerrilla activities in Tibet was undertaken.

An unnamed, retired CIA agent, who was heavily involved in the operations recalled that,

"The idea was to make Tibet very expensive for China. The Chinese had these long, vulnerable supply lines. The guerrillas were supposed to harass them. And for a while, they actually succeeded" (6).

From the summer of 1959, Eisenhower's administration also decided to provide backing for Tibet's guerrilla army, the Dokham Chushi Gangdruk, which had been founded the previous year. Their specialty, led by CIA operatives, was in implementing ambushes on Chinese forces emanating from mountain-high bases in Nepal nearby to the south.

A central reason behind these policies was Allen Dulles' influence, the CIA director from 1953 until 1961, and a fervent anti-Communist. Dulles wished to capitalise upon any possibility of destabilising China.

By early 1960, the CIA had managed to amass about 14,000 Tibetan guerrillas, along with other fighters of ethnic minority background, in order to wage a de facto war on China. Tibet's proxy forces were almost entirely dependent on the Americans, with the CIA [providing all of](#) their arms, equipment and sustenance (7).

Up to 10 CIA-run camps were erected in Nepal, directly bordering Tibet to the south. These CIA training facilities were situated less than 200 miles from Mount Everest, and close to the city of Pokhara in central Nepal. Other CIA bases were located within Tibet itself and also in India.

US military aircraft were seen flying unhindered into Chinese territory, and towards Tibet where, as the Himalayan peaks came into view, American pilots air-dropped further supplies to Tibetan forces.

The US Army transport plane, Lockheed C-130, underwent specific modification so that it could fly unhindered through Tibet's exceedingly thin atmosphere. CIA-trained agents working, somewhat surreally, from the Dalai Lama's caravan, were assisting the US C-130 planes by laying out special air-drop targets in the snow.

The American airborne expeditions into Tibet enjoyed crucial direction from a CIA station positioned in eastern Pakistan. From the mid-1950s onwards, Washington also dispatched hundreds of Tibetan exiles by aircraft to the US-controlled Pacific islands of Okinawa, Saipan and Guam, where they underwent training in guerrilla warfare.

Thereafter, during the blissful safety of night hours, the Tibetans were flown back to their homeland in American aircraft, where they were released into the great depths below by parachutes, and could now commence their guerrilla activities against Beijing's forces.

These Tibetans, many recruited from the warrior Khamba tribe in eastern Tibet, were equipped with American-made submachine guns, while each fighter had a locket dangling from his neck, with a photograph enclosed of their beloved Dalai Lama.

One former Tibetan fighter, Nawang Gayltzen, outlined that,

“None of us knew how to fight the Chinese the modern way. But the Americans taught us. We learned camouflage, spy photography, guns and radio operation”.

During the late spring of 1960, two CIA teams embedded in Tibet were forced to flee southwards over the Himalayas in horrendous conditions, but they somehow managed to navigate through the daunting mountain tops and reach India – such was their determination to avoid capture from communist soldiers. These occurrences, straight out of a James Bond film, are even today little known.

Meanwhile, four CIA radio teams were wiped out altogether, while just six of almost 20 CIA-trained Tibetan agents survived the fighting. A former security chief for the Dalai Lama, Lobsang Tsultrim, was recruited by the CIA in 1964, and he said that he was “not ashamed” about accepting American support. “I’m just disappointed that it was too little, too late”, Tsultrim continued.

Yet the CIA's funding of Tibetan independent causes was hardly what could be described as little. In the year 1964 alone, the CIA spent \$1,735,000 on its program of subversion in Tibet, a sum now equivalent to \$14 million.

Almost a third of this money in 1964 [went to](#) Tibetan guerrillas based in Nepal, \$400,000 was dispensed on covert training operations in Colorado, while the Dalai Lama was furnished with \$180,000 that year (8). CIA activities in Tibet lasted for almost 20 years until 1974, and we can safely assume that a massive amount of money was spent on this project, which ultimately ended in abject failure for the Americans, and indeed their Tibetan proxies.

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Notes

1 United States Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers: China, (USGPO, Washington D.C., 1957) p. 626

2 Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, The Second Cold War: Geopolitics and the Strategic Dimensions of the USA, (Springer 1st ed. 2017 edition, 23 June 2017), p. 76.

3 John Gittings, "Thubten Jigme Norbu" obituary, The Guardian, 8 September 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/sep/08/tibet>

4 Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, The Second Cold War: Geopolitics and the Strategic Dimensions of the USA, (Springer 1st ed. 2017 edition, 23 June 2017), p. 75.

5 Revolutionary Worker Online, "The Dalai Lama and the CIA", Revolutionary Worker, #765 17 July 1994, <https://revcom.us/a/firstvol/tibet/cia5.htm>

6 Paul Salopek, "The CIA's Secret War in Tibet", Chicago Tribune, 26 January 1997, https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:k_D8kxvN0VsJ:https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1997-01-26-9701270002-story.html+&cd=14&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ie

7 A. Tom Grunfeld, The Making of Modern Tibet, (Routledge; 2 Edition 25 July 1996) p. 157.

8 Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira, The Second Cold War: Geopolitics and the Strategic Dimensions of the USA, (Springer 1st ed. 2017 edition, 23 June 2017), p. 76.

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