

# Reins of Liberation: Geopolitics and Ethnopolitics of China, Central Asia and the Asia Pacific

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In late May 1949, after troops of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) entered Shanghai, Mansfield Addis, then First Secretary of the British Embassy in Nanjing, wrote to his mother back home: “Shanghai liberated! We rejoice that it was not more difficult! It brings the end nearer.”[1] The sentiment expressed in Addis’s letter drew the attention of the British Foreign Office, which felt the matter serious enough to warrant a special telegram to its Nanjing embassy in July 1949:

We notice a growing tendency in telegrams from China to refer to the Communist occupation of an area as “liberation”. In the case of a Consular officer reporting to you en clair and post facto the expression may possibly be unavoidable, but we feel bound to point out that China telegrams get a wide distribution here with the consequent danger that expressions such as this, oft repeated, may serve to strengthen beliefs all too prevalent that Chinese Communism is different from the Soviet brand. We hope therefore that posts will in future refrain from using this word in a sense so far divorced from its true meaning.[2]

Given the obvious disagreement between Addis and his superior in London, the rebuke was not likely to establish a universally accepted “true meaning” of “liberation” in the Foreign Office, still less in a larger realm of political communications. For instance, to the vast

population of China, what mattered in 1949 was not how similar Chinese Communism was to its Soviet predecessor but how different the CCP government was from the Guomindang (GMD) regime. Created by what has been called the “greatest and most popular of modern revolutions,” the new government in Beijing could justifiably assert that its own ascendancy changed the direction of Chinese history.[3] The CCP’s unprecedented sociopolitical engineering in China after 1949 easily made the two terms “pre-liberation” (jiefangqian) and “post-liberation” (jiefanghou) part of ordinary people’s daily vocabulary. Yet, depending on the historian’s chosen lense, the landmark significance of 1949 to the Chinese nation and society may either tower to the skies like the Himalayas or stretch like one of those nameless rolling hills in the Mongolian Plateau. To those who lived in the Himalayas and the Mongolian Plateau, the “liberation of 1949” carried yet another meaning altogether different from that experienced by people living in agrarian and coastal China.

### Mongolian Settlement

In February 1950, the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union became “liberated” China’s first significant international act. The treaty ended any lingering doubt about the status of the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) by finalizing Outer Mongolia’s independence from China, while locating both countries in the emerging “socialist camp”. If the Mongolia question had long been closely associated with the revolutions in China,

Mongolia, and Russia, its 1950 settlement was a far cry from the principle of national self-determination that all these revolutions claimed to support. Mongolia's ethnonationalist revolution never managed to break its international and inter-ethnic restraints. During the twentieth century, the powerful forces surrounding and intervening in Mongolia—China, Russia and Japan—were alternately hostile and conciliatory toward each other, while constantly keeping Mongolia divided. This was the case even when Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin forged their “Communist monolith” over the Eurasian landmass. Under the circumstances, the independent Mongolian state could be easily viewed as a geopolitical creation of others' schemes but not a dynamic national entity of its own devices, above all in light of the large Mongol population living across the border in Inner Mongolia.



Zhou Enlai signing the Sino-Soviet Treaty in Moscow

In reality, although Outer Mongolia's separation from China was successively supported and protected by the Tsarist government, which backed Mongolia's autonomy from China, and the Soviet government, which supported its independence, Mongolian separatism was never a Russian creation, as the Chinese claim ad nauseam, or as the US suspected, at least

until recently. Aside from a deep suspicion of its southern neighbor, Mongolian nationalism, in seeking national independence and unification, shared little common interest with Tsarist or Soviet hegemonic ambitions displayed in balance of power politics. Even the southern adversary was construed differently in Ulaanbaatar and in Moscow. To Ulaanbaatar, the primary threat was always the Mongols' ethnic nemesis, the “Chinese.” Thus, in early August 1945, in following the Soviet lead in declaring war on Japan, the MPR marked the oppressive “Chinese” as the intended enemy. To Moscow, the southern threat could come from a variety of antagonists, ranging from great-power competitors such as Japan and the United States to one-time revolutionary collaborators like the GMD and the CCP.

Despite those repeated “settlements” of the Mongolia question between the Chinese and the Russian (also Soviet) governments, as of 1950 MPR independence essentially marked a compromise between centralizing Chinese nationalism and secessionist Mongolian nationalism. After a half-century contest, neither the Chinese nor the Mongolian geopolitical visions prevailed completely. If MPR independence constituted the single irreversible loss to Chinese nationalism in the twentieth century, Inner Mongolia's incorporation into the PRC left a generation of Mongolian nationalists with bitter regrets.

Although the region now known as Inner Mongolia never left Chinese control—despite being partially occupied by Japan in World War II—the region's successive inclusion in the Republic of China and in the People's Republic of China held rather different meanings to the Mongols. In subscribing to the Moscow-inspired “national-liberation” mode of ethnopolitical movement, most left-wing Mongol partisans regarded the GMD phase of Inner Mongolia as a “pre-liberation” period in which ethnic resistance was sanctioned by revolutionary forces in China and the Soviet

Union. During the Chinese Civil War and the early Cold War years, however, leftist Inner Mongol autonomists were so deeply engulfed by Moscow-Yan'an-Ulaanbaatar bloc politics that they could not prevent the CCP's class-based "national liberation" from trumping their ethnonationalist movement. However reluctant, MPR leaders and most Inner Mongol autonomists had to accept the establishment of the PRC as the consummation of Inner Mongols' "national liberation" as well. Consequently, October 1 of 1949 marked the end of "national-liberation" history for both the Chinese and the Mongols.



Mao and Chinese leaders at Tiananmen, October 1, 1949

The PRC, in capping a century of rebellion, revolution, and civil and international wars, assumed an epochal role in redefining China's territoriality. Although the GMD regime's relocation to Taiwan complicated the task, founders of the PRC would proceed to establish effective control over the late Qing's imperial domain minus independent Mongolia. In the process they made a most important alteration of China's administrative system in order to accommodate Inner Mongol aspirations. Earlier, in 1935, CCP rhetoric on abolition of the Chinese provincial system in Inner Mongolia and on return of all Inner Mongolian territories to the Inner Mongols was closely associated with the party's agitation for the Inner Mongols' "independence" from GMD

despotism. This was an attempt by the CCP to win Inner Mongols support in the Chinese civil war, not an ironclad guarantee that Inner Mongols would maintain "regional autonomy" within a CCP-dominated China in the future. When the CCP resumed its military struggle with the GMD in late 1945, it was the Inner Mongols', especially the eastern Mongols', struggle for territorial autonomy, a toned-down demand from their original goal of accession to the MPR, that pressured the CCP to accept autonomy in exchange for the Inner Mongols' cooperation in its war against the GMD. In this sense, the Inner Mongols had a decisive impact on Chinese territoriality as we know it today.

Although the provincial system was first introduced into China by the Mongol rulers of the Yuan Dynasty in the late thirteenth century, by the twentieth century the power relations between the Chinese and the Mongols had developed in such a way that the Inner Mongols felt it necessary to reject the system as a Chinese form of ethnic oppression. Beginning in 1947 in Inner Mongolia and in 1949 throughout China, the model of Inner Mongolian territorial autonomy not only rolled back, at least symbolically, the provincial system that had prevailed in Inner Mongolia, but also became a model for arrangements in most of China's ethnic frontiers. Therefore, although the CCP used the formula of "regional autonomy of (minority) nationalities" (*minzu quyu zizhi*) to administer the PRC's multiethnic territoriality, it would distort history to suggest that on its own initiative the CCP adopted the "national autonomous region system" in lieu of the federation model of the Soviet Union. If the vigorous eastern Mongolian autonomous movement taught CCP leaders any lesson, they learned to avoid the unpredictable principle of national self-determination embodied theoretically in the Soviet model. Instead they embraced "regional autonomy" as a safer concession to frontier ethnic groups that would cause minimal uncertainty and facilitate the central government's unitary control of China's

territoriality.



In the 1950 settlement of the Mongolia question, Moscow emerged as the only party with no regrets. The treaty did not alter the MPR's orbiting around the Soviet Union, though, now within the framework of the newly forged Beijing–Moscow alliance, the Mongolian buffer functioned in more subtle ways. In the meantime, Moscow's retreat from its Yalta privileges in Manchuria proved worthwhile in exchange for China's allegiance. Just a few months after the Stalin–Mao talks, the Korean War broke out. It would soon attest to Soviet leaders the value of Mao's friendship. In the immediate post-World War II years, Soviet and American influence in Asia was only separated by a man-made thin line, the 38th parallel in Korea. This perilous situation soon changed. Korea was no longer a direct buffer between the two superpowers after Moscow decided to take its troops out of the Korean Peninsula in 1949 and to return control of its sphere of influence in Manchuria to China in 1950. In the fall of 1950, when Mao and his associates intervened in the Korean War, Stalin's "layered buffer" strategy was put to the test. As a geostrategic instrument, the Sino–Soviet treaty of 1950 significantly reduced the danger for the Soviet Union to become engaged in direct military confrontation with the United States in East Asia. China, on the other hand, after

accepting the loss of national sovereignty over Mongolia, got a "revolutionary responsibility" to fight American troops in Korea.

The American role in the 1950 settlement was indirect yet significant. Ever since the first American merchantman, *Empress of China*, arrived in Guangzhou (Canton) in 1784, the United States had maintained an exceptional position among the great powers in not infringing on China's peripheral territories. Yet, during China's twentieth-century transformation into a national state, the United States became increasingly involved in the question of Chinese territoriality. From the Chinese perspective, American involvement was a mixed blessing. After 1931 Washington's moralistic and legalistic stand against Japanese occupation of Manchuria was certainly helpful in buttressing Chinese morale. During World War II the Roosevelt administration aided China in restoring its great power status. This not only led to the end of the "unequal treaties" between China and Western powers but also promised China recovery of its "lost territories" from Japan. Roosevelt's stumbling on the Mongolia question and his concession to Stalin's Manchurian ambitions at Yalta, however, were not appreciated by Chinese of any political persuasion. After Yalta, Moscow's Mongolian satellite and Manchurian sphere seemed to bear an American stamp.



## The Empress of China sails

During the period under study, United States foreign policy was neither propelled by a primary Inner Asian interest nor pushed by a principled concern for Asian “minorities.” Having always approached China from the eastern direction of the Pacific Ocean and constantly focused on their “Chinese” counterpart, American policymakers had little understanding of Inner Asian issues in the context of their China interests. Washington’s geostrategic bias in favor of the eastern coast of Asia was most clearly reflected in the way in which it approached questions of Chinese territoriality during and after World War II: while President Roosevelt accepted Stalin’s claim for Mongolia rather casually, his successors would be continuously preoccupied with conditions and statuses of Manchuria, Korea, and Taiwan. Even today it cannot be said that U.S. foreign policy has overcome its Inner Asian blind spot. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, Central Asia between China and Europe has remained a “geopolitical black hole” to which “America is too distant to be dominant ... but too powerful not to be engaged.”[4] So the Inner Asian predicament continues.

In addition to the geopolitical puzzle, there was also ideo-cultural bewilderment. Apparently, during World War II and the early Cold War years, Washington was not yet sufficiently embedded in China politics sufficiently to develop a clear approach to the tangle of ethnopolitics. The State Department remained cautious in these years and its deliberations of the subject contrast distinctly from British Foreign Office officials’ stereotypical and condescending remarks about the Mongols. American foreign policy officials did not consider China’s ethnopolitics in the same manner as they did the “minorities question” of Europe. During the early stage of the Chinese Civil War, amazed by the simultaneous

processes of the GMD-CCP talks in Nanjing and their fighting in Manchuria, Walton Butterworth of the U.S. Embassy in China remarked to a colleague that “we have been schooled and trained in a European type of politics, a politics so highly developed and sophisticated... Chinese politics, however, are still in a relatively primitive stage, and events do not take on the same meaning in relation to the whole.”[5] This observation was also reflective of American officials’ view on the “underdeveloped” stage of China’s ethnopolitics, which rarely gave agency to the frontier ethnic groups.

In Washington’s postwar Asian policy Japan constituted an exception that connected the country’s democratization and social transformation directly with American security. In the rest of East Asia, American foreign policy was concerned more with Asian governments’ external alignments than with their internal orientations. Even when General George Marshall was promoting a “democratic solution” of the Chinese Civil War, his immediate objective was to bring two authoritarian Chinese parties together under American patronage. During these pre-“democratization” and pre-“human rights” years of Washington’s Asian policy, the ethnopolitical connotations of the Mongolia question could hardly fit into American policymakers’ agenda for China. It should be added, however, that the reasons for the incompatibility between the Mongols’ and the Americans’ interests in China affairs were not one-sided. Between the powerful yet pro-CCP eastern Mongolian movement and the pro-American yet extremely weak “Racial Mongols” and Prince De’s group, American policymakers did not have a viable choice even if they had intended to translate their “genuine sympathy” with the Inner Mongols into policy measures.[6]



Prince De (left front) in 1930s

In the postwar years, Washington would eventually get an Inner Asian foothold only in areas where legacies of the receding British Empire existed. Whereas the Inner Mongols failed to catch the attention of Washington, the Tibetans successfully forged American connections. But, again, Washington's Tibetan enterprise did not begin with a premise of "democratization" or with public support of ethnic minorities' resistance against the Chinese. Rather, as rationalized by the American Embassy in India in the late 1940s, isolated from its radicalized surroundings and having a conservative and religious populace, Tibet could serve as a "bulwark against the spread of Communism throughout Asia, or at least as an island of conservatism in a sea of political turmoil." [7] Like Washington's surreptitious but short-lived dealings with Prince De in the late 1940s, American support of the Tibetan "island of conservatism" began quietly in the 1950s. In this sense, Inner Mongolia set a precedent for America's clandestine and lukewarm interference in China's inter-ethnic affairs during the Cold War.

The 1950 settlement of the Mongolia question did not end China's territorial conflicts. The event simply marked the conclusion of a historical period in which the issue of Chinese territoriality was intertwined with large-scale wars and violent revolutions. It can also serve

as a point of reference for our understanding of many current problems along China's peripheries. In less than a decade after Stalin and Mao cemented their Eurasian alliance along the Mongolian frontier, the geopolitical landscape of East Asia created by early Cold-War events began to erode amidst the Moscow-Beijing polemics over a range of ideological and geopolitical issues. As the two sides' "anti-imperialist" struggles increasingly turned toward each other in the 1960s, the Mongolian buffer gained increasing geopolitical importance. While the MPR continued to orbit around Moscow in the new confrontation, tens of thousands of Inner Mongols, including Ulanfu and former eastern Mongol leaders, became the targets of the "Cultural Revolution." Inter-national and inter-ethnic conflicts between and within the two Communist giants were laid bare in the rubble of Stalinist and Maoist ideologies and the former alliance. As the discussion below will show, while the Mongolian buffer stood still in the north, a chain of events along China's southwestern frontiers contributed to the sea change in the geopolitical landscape of East Asia.

### Himalayan Dominos

Having constituted one of the Qing Empire's ethnopolitical constituencies, Tibet was claimed by successive regimes of the Republic period only nominally. Prior to 1949, the CCP had little influence in Tibet. In his youth, Mao had advocated "assistance to the self-government and self-determination of Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Qinghai". But he changed his mind shortly after the CCP was organized under Comintern guidance in the 1920s. He then believed that Tibet was under the influence of British imperialism and its self-determination could only benefit the British. [8] By the time of China's war against Japan, the CCP had already shelved the slogan of national self-determination and began to promote unity between the Han and all "minority

nationalities” within the territory of the Republic of China. In 1949, the CCP victory was marked not only by its defeat of the GMD but also by its success in abolishing separatist movements in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. For a moment Tibet became the sole ethnic frontier still estranged from Beijing. CCP leaders immediately set out to change this.

In early 1950, He Long, commander of the Southwest Military District, encouraged the advance troops of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to enter Tibet with these words: “You must be resolved to go to Tibet and become the first ancestors of the Han people in Tibet.” These words reflected a general sense of unfamiliarity with Tibet among CCP cadres.[9] Yet, although leaders of the New China chose to view the PLA’s advance into Tibet as an unprecedented feat, they were actually renewing an unfinished business of recovering “administrative power” in Tibet initiated by the Qing government at the beginning of the century. The CCP’s initial strategy was also a perfect copy of the GMD’s unfulfilled orientation toward Tibet — “virtuous affection preceded by power coercion” (*de hua wei fu*). In October 1950, the PLA occupied Tibet’s doorway in the east, Chamdo, and thus put into effect a scheme that the GMD had only theorized.

CCP implementation of the historical agenda initiated by the late Qing and GMD regimes is indicative of the fact that China was at last emerging from the dark valley of continuous decline of recent centuries. Taking advantage of the greatest achievement of the GMD regime’s diplomatic success in gaining international recognition of China’s officially claimed territorial domain, the CCP was able to wield coherent state power within China’s political borders. In the Cold War era, the PLA’s march into Tibet was termed “aggression” in the West, but “liberation” in China. But in view of the policy continuity between China’s central governments since the

Qing, Tibet’s incorporation into the PRC in the mid-20th century was not simply a one-act play in the wake of the establishment of communist ideology and socialist system in China. In this episode two much longer historical threads converged. One was China’s century-long evolution into a national state under Western pressure and influence; another was the readjustment of Asia’s geostrategic relations caused by the two world wars and the rise of revolutionary movements in Eurasia. These developments caused the great powers to retreat from China’s peripheries, with the result that those “gray areas” between China’s domestic and foreign affairs, such as Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang, began to assume new significance in a resurgent China as well as in regional perspective.

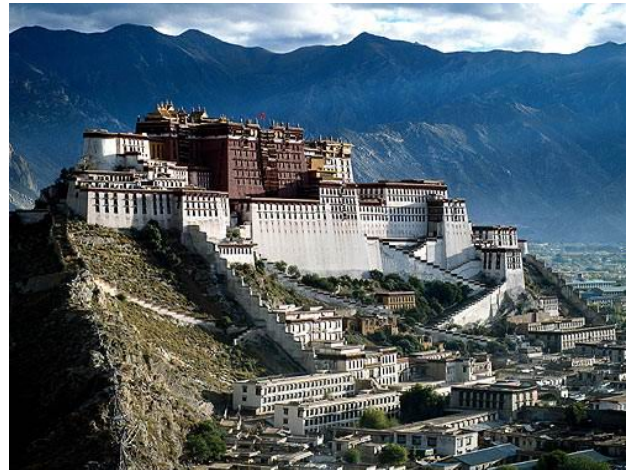
Nevertheless, Beijing was unable to immediately complete its claims to sovereignty over Tibet. Political scientists define sovereignty as a compound conception, consisting of the state’s effective domestic authority and its legitimate international status and rights.[10] Historically, in a given national history, these elements are not necessarily achieved simultaneously. In the early PRC, the new Chinese government did not fully achieve the domestic aspect of sovereignty in Tibet. Having detached itself from China’s political authority for nearly four decades, Lhasa had no intention of changing the status quo. Another serious obstacle was the mutual exclusiveness between the Dalai Lama-centered sociopolitical system of Tibet and the political culture of “New Democracy” promoted by Beijing. In the early years of the PRC, Beijing hewed to a moderate course toward minority nationalities in general and Tibet in particular.

Before the PLA entered Tibet, the Lhasa regime strived to maintain Tibet’s existence outside Chinese authority. The only concession that it was willing to make was to have a *tanyue* (secular sponsor-religious teacher) relationship with the Chinese government. Conversely,

Beijing's goal in Tibet, as in the rest of China, was for the PLA to occupy Tibet and "reform Tibet into a people's democracy." [11] The battle of Chamdo left no room for even a slim hope that Lhasa could resist the PLA with armed force. The negotiations in the next few months eventually produced an "Agreement between the People's Central Government and the Local Tibetan Government on the Measures of Peaceful Liberation of Tibet," signed in Beijing on May 23, 1951. The seventeen-point agreement constituted a compromise between change and continuity. Through these measures, the central government in Beijing achieved territorial and diplomatic sovereignty over Tibet and abolished Tibet's de facto separation from China. The Chinese empire's historic "loose rein" policy toward frontier "dependencies" was thereby relegated to history and Tibet's own "nationalizing" effort was crushed. Thus, the PRC basically restored the territorial domain of the Qing Empire except for Outer Mongolia and Taiwan, but in the form of a modern "geo-body." [12]

Yet the agreement did not genuinely accomplish Beijing's goal of "recovering administrative power" in Tibet. In granting the Tibetan people the "right to exercise regional nationality self-government," the agreement pledged not to change the current political system of Tibet. An implicit contradiction between these seemingly congruent contents could be understood only in the recent historical context of Inner Mongolia, the only region in China at the time where Beijing administered through "regional nationality self-government" while exercising important elements of central authority as in other Chinese provinces. Therefore, the no-change pledge in the 1951 agreement reflected Beijing's recognition of the wisdom of the late Qing's policy of limiting central authority in light of regional ethnopolitical and ethnocultural conditions. There was however an important difference between the CCP and the Manchus: Whereas the Manchus intended

to maintain their authority over a stable, layered multiethnic enterprise, the CCP made concessions over "domestic sovereignty" only temporarily for the sake of achieving Lhasa's submission to China's territorial and diplomatic sovereignty.



Potala Palace in Lhasa

In these years the only change in the original structure of Tibet was the presence of the PLA. The Tibetan government retained most of its functions. Beijing had no official administrative office in Lhasa. Its connection with Lhasa was mainly maintained by Zhang Jingwu, who traveled frequently in his dual capacity as director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the Central Committee's representative in Tibet. Even the CCP's lower-level organizations under the Tibet Working Committee had to operate in the name of the PLA. [13] This situation was reminiscent of the CCP's experience in the pre-1949 years in dispatching military work teams to the GMD-controlled "white areas." Thus, in the early years of the PRC, despite the seventeen-point agreement, Tibet remained the only area in which the Chinese government was unable to exercise domestic sovereignty.

The so-called "paradox of state power" depicts a phenomenon in which the unilateral strengthening of state power may



proportionally weaken its effectiveness at the societal level. That is, the effectiveness of state power can be enhanced only through coordination with society. This means both the state's avoidance of arbitrary behaviors and society's active participation in policy making. A policy enforced solely with state violence nullifies social participation and is consequently ineffective in the constructive sense.[14] In 1951 Tibet's incorporation into the PRC without undue difficulties reflected the degree of effectiveness of China's new government. Beijing's military-political operations (battle of Chamdo + negotiations for the seventeen-point agreement) had roots in Chinese statecraft of "inducement with both benevolence and power" (*en wei bing zhong*). Viewed from the premise of "paradox of state power," the 1951 reconciliation between Beijing and Lhasa indicates that the Tibetans were by no means passive in arranging the seventeen-point agreement. In reality they actively participated in fashioning the first "one country, two systems" of the PRC.

Yet, because the Inner Mongolia model, which was an ethnopolitical mechanism for Beijing to exercise central authority, paved the way for the multiethnic system of the PRC, the Tibet model of 1951 with its much higher level of autonomy had slim chance to succeed.[15] In the final analysis, the "one country, two systems" in Tibet in the 1950s could not become a stable state mechanism of the PRC because Beijing and Lhasa represented two forces that would prove utterly incompatible in terms of ideology and political goals. Beijing's pursuit of complete sovereignty would eventually lead to an attempt to "Inner Mongolize" Tibet. Conversely, Lhasa did not give up the goal of maximum autonomy. Ideologically, the Tibetans followed their religion and gurus as guides in the incarnate cycles. The CCP on the other hand was committed to thoroughly reforming Tibetan society and synchronizing the land of snow with socialist China. Indeed the PLA marched into

Tibet under a slogan of "carrying the revolution to the end" and with a goal of "liberating" the Tibetan people from the "feudal" system of Tibet. The CCP was not the first to attempt to "reform" Tibet. Both the Qing government in the 1900s and various regimes of the Republic period made efforts or showed intentions of reforming the Tibetan society.[16] Evidently, although their concepts of reforms for Tibet differed, the late Qing court, the GMD, and the CCP shared the goal of transforming the Tibetan theocratic system.

Actually, the CCP approach to revolution was such that confrontation between Beijing and Lhasa did not happen right away. The CCP approach differed from that of the Qing and GMD governments in seeking to start its revolution from the bottom of the society. It viewed "mass basis" as the precondition for policy implementations. This created a contradiction in Beijing's Tibet policy from the onset. On the one hand, more than the Qing and GMD regimes the CCP leadership stressed materialization of the central government's authority in Tibet through meaningful reforms. On the other, also more than its two predecessors, the CCP was sensitive to the social obstacles to reforms in Tibet. The CCP believed that the wide popular support it enjoyed in China was the precondition for the "liberation" of China in 1949 and legitimized the PRC. Yet after the seventeen-point agreement was concluded, Mao realized that the "material basis" and "mass basis" for implementing the agreement did not exist in Tibet. Beijing was superior militarily, but it was weaker than the Tibetan authorities in "social influence." [17] For the CCP, the difficulty in promoting its policies in Tibet was not limited to the lack of Han masses in the region. An even greater obstacle was the tenacious spiritual tie between the Tibetan masses and the Tibetan theocracy. In Mao's words, "They [Tibetan people] have a much stronger belief in Dalai and in local headmen than in us. . . . They support their leaders absolutely, and hold them

sacred and inviolable.” In 1954 the United Front Department of the CCP held a three-month conference in Beijing on Tibet. It concluded that in Tibet “the superstructure of the feudal serfdom is a theocratic dictatorship by the clergy and autocrats. Today it rules the Tibetan nation and can still represent the Tibetan nation. . . . Thus our various policies in the Tibetan region have necessarily to serve the most important task of winning over the Dalai clique.”[18] In a word, CCP leaders recognized the need for a policy of inter-ethnic cooperation. This policy of patience involved working with the upper strata of the Tibetan society and postponing mobilizing the masses in class struggle.

Beijing’s “Dalai line” collapsed after the Lhasa incident of March 1959. But the seeds of change were sown throughout the 1950s. The delicate inter-ethnic collaboration in Tibet was then replaced by intense class struggles. Although the status quo of Tibet proper was temporarily maintained, in the mid-1950s the CCP began pushing reforms in the Tibetan areas of Qinghai, Xikang, and Sichuan (Amdo and Kham to the Tibetans). These reforms provoked local resistance. In the face of PLA attack, members of the resistance movement retreated into Tibet. The spillover seriously undermined the fragile political balance in Tibet, and eventually contributed to the Lhasa incident of March 1959. Melvyn Goldstein’s research further reveals that the extremist tendencies of the hardliners within the Lhasa regime and among CCP officials in Tibet eliminated any chance for a stable compromise between Beijing and Lhasa.[19]



Dalai Lama (r.) and Panchen Lama flank Mao Zedong in Beijing, 1959

From Beijing’s perspective, the 1951 arrangements served the purpose of ushering Tibet gradually toward its socialist transformation and for transition to the central government’s complete “domestic sovereignty.” There is evidence that as early as in 1956 and 1957 leaders in Beijing were quite optimistic and started to encourage its Tibetan Working Committee to initiate reforms in Tibet. Yet when full-scale preparations for reforms caused strong objections among the Tibetan aristocracy, Beijing ordered the working committee to beat a speedy retreat. At the same time Beijing promised Tibetan leaders that there would be “no reforms for the next six years.” In response, opponents of reform raised a demand for “no reforms for ever” and asked all Han to leave Tibet. About two months prior to the Lhasa incident, Mao apparently had lost

patience with the “Dalai line.” Now he held that “a general showdown will be necessary.” Noting the presence of rebels in the Lhasa area, Mao pointed out that this was a good thing “because now war can be used to solve the problem.”[20] Such thinking clearly jettisoned the one country-two systems formula.

Its military superiority was always the CCP’s strongest asset in dealing with the Tibetan question. After the battle of Chamdo, Beijing prioritized the peaceful political approach to integrating Tibet. Following the Lhasa incident of 1959, the PLA quickly suppressed the Tibetan rebellion. Yet the ensuing reforms were a far cry from Beijing’s hopes to achieve inter-ethnic cooperation in Tibet. The earlier orientation, as described by Deng Xiaoping, was “not to agitate so-called class struggles within minority nationalities by outsiders” and “not to carry out reforms by outsiders.” That stance, which apparently took account of the “paradox of state power,” had been superseded by 1959.

In 1959, an immediate historical result of the Lhasa incident was to sever the connection between CCP Tibet policy and Qing practices. From that moment, differences between ethnopolitical cultures no longer restrained Beijing. The completion of China’s domestic sovereignty with the extension of its power to Tibet would have enormous impact internationally.

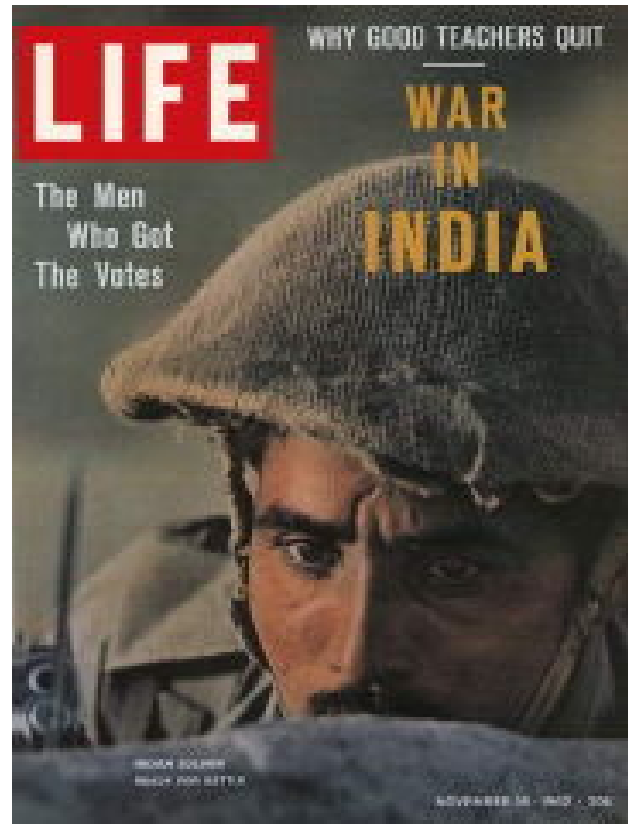
Interestingly, the ideological and military conflicts of the Cold War era notwithstanding, the most important significance of Beijing’s Tibet policy in global perspective was to make China a more “Western-like” actor in international relations. Among the consequences of the events in Tibet from 1951 to 1959 was to shed China, as an international-political entity, of vestiges of the by-gone empire. Such an effect could also have been achieved through Tibetan independence, but

that has not, of course, come to pass.

Since China’s territorial and political reintegration after 1949 was presided by the CCP and took place in the Cold War, a dual paradox occurred: the further Beijing advanced its anti-Western ideology and developed its revolutionary social system in China, the more complete PRC domestic sovereignty became and thus the closer the PRC came to the West in normative terms; at the same time, the more closely the PRC resembled Western “nation-states” in its international behavior, the more Beijing’s foreign policies targeted the Western bloc centered on the United States as enemies. Akira Iriye’s “power and culture” analysis of Japan’s international experience may shed light on this paradox: In the late 19th century, Japan rose during the era of imperialism, and its subscription to the prevalent international relations culture of the time eventually led to its power confrontation with the West.[21] In the mid-20th century, the PRC learned to stand on its feet in an era of the Cold War, and it could not exempt itself from the conventions of the age. Therefore, in 1949 the CCP’s “leaning to one side” was probably historically inevitable, but its leaning to the Soviet side was a choice of the moment. The PRC’s alliance with the Soviet bloc in the early Cold war was surely a challenge to the West. It should not, however, be understood as a reversion to China’s historic convergence with the norms of international relations.

The changes in China’s foreign relations in the wake of the Tibetan rebellion best illustrates the point that the PRC’s ostentatious garb as a communist cold warrior could no longer conceal its character as a nationalist state. The armed conflicts in Tibet after 1956 and Beijing’s suppression of the Tibetan rebellion in 1959 and 1960 not only fundamentally changed the political relationship between Beijing and Tibet but also set off a series of events affecting China’s foreign relations. After the Lhasa incident, Sino-Indian relations deteriorated

rapidly, leading to a border war between the two countries in 1962. CIA analysts in the United States at the time, and historians in China and the West today, agree that the Sino-Indian war was one important reason for the Sino-Soviet split.[22] After the mid-1950s, the US government also took advantage of the turmoil in Tibet and launched a secret war in the region to undermine Beijing's authority. When the Sino-Indian war broke out, Washington seized the chance to incorporate India in its strategy of containing and undermining China. In view of these developments, Beijing's failure to achieve inter-ethnic cooperation in Tibet toppled the domino and had immediate effect on the Cold War in Eurasia. In the brief period of several years, China's long and tranquil borders from the northeast to the southwest became perilous again. Aside from facing the American threat from the Pacific, the PRC was now challenged from different directions along its inland frontiers. It appeared that to China the Cold War had become a two-front struggle. But the Cold War paradigm is severely inadequate in explaining China's policies in these events.



Indian soldier depicted on the cover of Life at the outbreak of Sino-Indian War

### International History of the Cold War Period

By 1959, the significance of the Tibetan question already surpassed the “domestic relationship” between Beijing and Lhasa, becoming a catalyst for the changed international strategic relations in Eurasia. In the new strategic landscape, the United States was more a beneficiary than a creator. After the mid-1950s, the focus of Washington's Tibet policy shifted from instigating the Dalai Lama's opposition to Beijing to secretly assisting the rebels in Kham and Tibet. Until the PLA decisively suppressed the Tibetan rebellion, the United States waged a small proxy war against China along the Himalayas. But America's escalated Cold War in Tibet had minimal strategic impact, above all because the US continued to maintain a one-China policy, and it never officially acknowledged its role in the

CIA's secret war in Tibet. To conceal US involvement, the weapons airdropped into Tibet were mainly those made by the British in World War I. At the time these were commonly used in South Asian countries. During the four years of the CIA airlift, only one plane was targeted by light weapons on the ground.[23] After 1960 on several occasions the PLA seized airdropped supplies from the rebels and captured a small number of parachuted Tibetan agents. [24] Yet throughout the Cold War, the PRC kept silent about this matter. Suffice to say that America's secret war in Tibet not only did not cause any drastic development in the Cold War confrontation between the PRC and the United States. Rather, it actually coincided with a major policy reorientation of Beijing's that diminished American importance in Inner Asia. After the Lhasa incident, Beijing became preoccupied with the war in India, which until that time had maintained a largely friendly relationship with China. This was the first "side-switching" in China's Cold War foreign policy, a precedent to Beijing's switching of sides between the Soviet Union and the United States more than a decade later.

The India of the mid-20th century was certainly no longer a group of princely states or semi-independent provinces. As a new post-colonial national state, it claimed a geopolitical inheritance from the British Empire, while the PRC, with its revolutionary-state identity, also inherited the geopolitical properties and territorial claims of the former Qing Empire. The CCP leaders were not shy of praising the Manchus' contributions to China's territorial expansion.[25] In other words, the historical background of the Sino-Indian conflicts in the 1950s and 1960s was the two nations' respective political transformations. Between the two largest Asian countries was the highest international divide in the world. Earlier, the divide served as a buffer between two vast empires.[26] In the mid-20th century, however, the divide turned into a seam that stitched two national states together, both holding

territorial sovereignty as sacred and inviolable and watching each other suspiciously. The ambiguous borders left by the old empires created difficulties for bilateral relations between China and India. But more often border disputes between two states are symptoms rather than causes of their mutual distrust.

Given its geographic and cultural connection, India was the only big country that could exert direct influence on Tibet. In a sense, from Beijing's perspective, India became the successor of British imperialist interests in Tibet. These conditions lay behind Beijing's strong reaction to Indian government criticism of the Tibetan situation in the 1950s. After Beijing's gradualist approach failed in Tibet, it vented toward India the grievances against British imperialism accumulated during China's protracted disintegration from the Opium War forward. Mao and his associates never viewed China's relations with India as purely a bilateral dealing between two national states. Mao's way of seeing things led to a conviction that a quarrel with India over Tibet not only would not divert the direction of China's diplomatic struggle but could actually enhance China's struggle against the United States.

The CCP leaders were convinced that their India orientation was completely compatible with the PRC's general international strategy in the Cold War, one that grew out of political strategies derived from China's domestic revolutionary struggles. United front was such a typical stratagem. As perceived by the CCP, because of its Asian identity and colonized past, India was a natural member of the international united front against Western imperialism and the United States. In April 1955, at the Bandung Conference the Chinese and the Indian governments co-sponsored the five principles of peaceful coexistence designed to facilitate relations among countries of different political systems. This was the peak of the two governments' cooperation in uniting Asian and

African countries. After the Tibetan rebellion, the Dalai Lama escaped to India and issued a statement against the PRC. In response Mao suggested that the Chinese media carry out sharp criticism of Nehru. There was no need to fear upsetting him or falling out with him. The struggle against Nehru was to be carried forward in order to achieve unity with him. Such a seemingly self-contradictory “struggle philosophy” had an inner logic, pivoting on the relationship between “part” (jubu) and “whole” (quanju). In May 1959, Mao deployed such logic in finalizing an important letter from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Indian government. In the letter, Mao sought to explain to the Indian government that the Sino-Indian disagreement over Tibet involved China’s internal affairs and sovereignty. These were “issues of principle” over which China could not make concessions. Yet Mao also appeared conciliatory in suggesting that this disagreement only involved a “temporary” and “partial” problem and should not damage the two nations’ overall cooperation in international affairs.[27]



Map shows disputed territories in red at the

time  
of the Sino-India War

In China’s Cold War diplomacy, such an orientation of gaining “overall unity” through “partial struggle” often proved counterproductive. In its annual report for the year of 1960, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs used Mao’s idea about “part” and “whole” as the guideline to all of China’s international struggles. Thus, the report identified separately the United States, the Soviet Union, India, and Indonesia, all being in contradiction with China in different senses, as targets of China’s diplomatic struggles overall and partially. India was the main target of Chinese diplomatic struggle in South and Southeast Asia, and India’s anti-China policy was the central focus of Chinese diplomatic struggle during the first half of 1960. In the meantime, the struggle against India must be subordinated to the struggles against the United States and the Soviet Union. In reality, such an orderly, stratified pyramid of international struggles often resulted in confusion. As admitted by the report, in the execution of foreign policies, the two recurring mistakes were confusing the relationship between “struggle” and “unity” and “seeing trees only but not the forest.”[28]

In the final analysis, the confusion in Beijing’s decisions about foreign policy priorities reflected an omnipresent contradiction between the CCP leaders’ Cold War mentality informed by ideology and those concrete foreign policy issues that the new Chinese national state had to deal with. When the 1960s began, the Sino-Indian relationship, just like the Sino-Soviet relationship, was suffering from an expanding crack caused by conflicting national interests. These long and entrenched interests would eventually destroy the “common unity” of the Cold War era inherent in such concepts as “Asian-African unity” and “socialist bloc.” After the second Taiwan Strait crisis of 1958, Sino-American relations entered what Mao called a period of “Cold War

coexistence". Except for their indirect contest in the Vietnam War, China and the United States engaged each other only in mutual verbal abuse through propaganda. As China's "overall" Cold War with the United States stabilized, its "partial" confrontation with India began to escalate rapidly.

Basic to China's international standing in the 1950s was that the PRC was a member of the "socialist camp." To Beijing, this international identity was firmly established when it concluded an alliance with the Soviet Union. Understandably, the deterioration of the Sino-Indian relationship caused concern in Moscow. "Socialist camp" was a unique product of the international politics of the Cold War era. Members of the camp upheld the "leader principle" (the Soviet Union as the head), and emphasized "fraternal inter-party" relations (common ideology). They also sought to promote a supposedly new type of inter-state relationship encapsulated in the five principles of peaceful coexistence and understood world affairs from a class-struggle perspective. The ruling parties of the socialist countries were convinced that in possessing a superior socio-political system and practicing just and reasonable inter-state relations, the socialist camp would eventually supercede the current international system of the "bourgeois nation-states." In practice, however, this ideal for reforming the international order was ultimately incompatible with the socialist countries' own ingrained nation-state character. Internal strife within the socialist camp, most notably the China-Soviet conflict, eventually led to a fundamental restructuring of Cold War power relations.

By the time of the first border conflict between China and India, Beijing and Moscow had already quarreled over the so-called "joint fleet" and "long-wave radio stations." [29] In early October 1959, Nikita Khrushchev led a Soviet delegation to meet with CCP leaders in Beijing. The two sides engaged in tense

arguments over the recent Taiwan Strait crisis and the Sino-Indian conflict. The Soviet side accused Beijing of taking a bellicose stand over the Taiwan question and risking the provoking an unnecessary war with the United States. In addition, the Soviets suggested that Beijing made serious mistakes in postponing reforms in Tibet and failing to intercept Dalai's flight into exile. They also blamed Beijing for provoking the Sino-Indian conflict, contending that the CCP's India policy created opportunities for American imperialism. Not surprisingly, Mao and his associates refused to accept any of these criticisms, reciprocating the Soviets by labeling their attitude as opportunism. The Chinese side stressed that both Taiwan and Tibet were China's internal affairs and China could not possibly retreat from its principled stand. CCP leaders wondered why, as a "big brother," the Soviet Union should make no distinction between right and wrong and take the side of bourgeois India in the Sino-Indian conflict. During the talks Khrushchev raised the issue of "the Soviet Union as the head of the socialist camp." This was intended to explain why the Soviets "said things ordinary guests would not have said," meaning that the Soviet side criticized Beijing in the "big brother" capacity and on the basis of "communist principled stand." [30]



Mao and Khrushchev in Beijing

These exchanges illustrate the contradiction

between the internationalist principles supposedly governing the internal relationships of the socialist camp and the national stands taken respectively by Chinese and Soviet leaders. Beijing would criticize Moscow's failure to support Beijing in its 1959 confrontation with India for weakening the socialist camp. Three years later, during the Cuban missile crisis, Beijing would reciprocate in not only denying Moscow firm support but sharply criticizing Khrushchev's handling of the situation.[31] By the early 1960s, the socialist camp had disintegrated.

Tensions between the elevation of "internationalist norms" in theory by members of the socialist camp and their "nation-state" behavior in practice lay at the heart of the Sino-Soviet split.[32] So far as the PRC foreign policy was concerned, the combination between Mao's revolutionary theories and the national temperament of the Chinese state produced rather extreme effects. Zhou Enlai would nevertheless insist that the United States remained the main target of China's international struggles. Soon after the Sino-Indian border war began, in an internal speech Zhou rejected the opinion that Chinese diplomacy had created enemies in all directions. He said: "In this struggle against the Indian reactionaries, we still made the United States the most conspicuous [target]." In other words, the distinction between the "partial" struggle against India and the "overall" struggle against the United States no longer existed in Beijing's foreign policy.[33]

As the Sino-Indian conflict unfolded, certain foreign policy objectives of India and the United States converged. In the initial years of the PRC, Washington often complained that India's neutral stand in the Cold War was tantamount to appeasement toward communist countries. After the Sino-Indian war began, the CIA pointed out with satisfaction that a "profound change has taken place in India's outlook." "A conviction of Peiping's [Beijing's]

fundamental hostility and perfidy has emerged among virtually all levels of Indian opinion in the past few months. . . . At the same time, there is general gratification with the sympathy and support received from the US and the British Commonwealth and a growing realization that the preservation of India's freedom will be heavily dependent on the West." In the Sino-Indian conflict and Sino-Soviet rupture Washington saw opportunities for the United States to "take a tougher stance" against China and even for US-Soviet collaboration in dealing with the PRC. The CIA estimated that as of the end of 1962, the so-called "Aid India Club," including the United States and the Soviet Union, had committed totally \$2.5 billion for India's economic development in the next two years.[34]

Even before the Sino-Indian border war began, Zhou Enlai was prescient enough to lament that the peaceful coexistence he had fostered between China and India would soon be replaced by a "long armed coexistence." [35] The war certainly destroyed what Beijing had imagined as a trans-Himalaya united front against American imperialism. For a moment, what appeared in the Himalayas seemed to be an American-Indian consortium for the purpose of containing China. The Sino-Indian border war would be over shortly, but the Himalayas would remain a second front for China's Cold War, which would spread to China's northwestern and northeastern borders in the years to come. Long after the guns in the Sino-Indian War were silenced, the Tibet issue would remain a thorn in China's side, with the potential to aggravate US-China relations.

## Conclusions

After the Sino-Soviet split became widely recognized, a CIA analysis pointed out:

Relations between the Soviet Union and Communist China have deteriorated so far in the past ten years that we can say with validity



that they are now engaged in their own “cold war.” . . . The present rupture signifies that Communist ideology has not only failed to overcome nationalism within the bloc, but has indeed aggravated such sentiment.[36]



1967 Chinese poster: Down with the Soviet Revisionists!

To policymakers in the West who in the early Cold War years viewed the communist bloc as a monolith, this estimate by the CIA constituted a fundamental change of perceptions. But what “Chinese nationalism” revealed in Beijing’s Cold War diplomacy was much more complex than that demonstrated in the Sino-Soviet rupture. Before treating China as a participant in modern international affairs, we must recognize that in the 19th century and the better part of the 20th century China was a national state in the making. In shaping that process, China’s inter-ethnic affairs in Inner

Asia were as vital as China’s international relations in East Asia. Events along China’s northern and western frontiers should not be just concerns of specialists in Mongolian and Tibetan studies. They belong to the pages of international history.

In the mid-19th century, imperialist incursion coming from the West threw the Qing Empire into a whirlpool of violent transition but by no means severed the connections between the empire’s Han and non-Han constituencies. As shown here, the Mongols and the Tibetans have occupied significant positions in China’s twentieth century transformation, within which Communist rule in China after 1949 was but one stage. Therefore, any consideration of Chinese nationalism cannot afford to let its international entanglement obscure its inter-ethnic politics. The two aspects are invariably intertwined.

During the Qing Dynasty, Mongolia and Tibet were tied together in the Manchus’ imperial management through their mutual military and religious influence, and the military role of the Mongols in the service of the empire. The Mongolian-Tibetan enterprise was central to the Manchu effort to maintain a delicate balance of ethnic-power within China. During the 20th century, however, the two regions became politically disassociated. The administrative conception of “Mongolian-Tibetan Affairs” in the Republic period mainly meant that both regions were “special,” which was to say that neither was effectively controlled by China’s weak central regimes. Whereas the Russians used force to consolidate control over their protectorate in Outer Mongolia, the British were satisfied with a balancing position in Tibet to contain Chinese efforts to assert sovereignty there. Both the Russian and British approaches were typical buffer strategies of the imperialist age, and together they unseated the dependency management of the Qing Empire and undercut the historical connections between Tibetan and

Mongolian politics. Yet in the meantime these strategies had rather different impact on 20th-century Chinese politics and the macro-historical transformation of Chinese territoriality.

The experience of the Chinese Communist Party best illustrates how British and Russian influence in the two ethnic frontiers impinged on China's revolutionary history. In the course of its Long March in the 1930s, the CCP turned away from Tibet, a land under Western imperialist influence, and struck out toward Mongolia, a territory under communist control. This illustrates how political ideologies and divisions affected East Asian geopolitics long before the Cold War started. Yet, in 1949, when the CCP ascended to power and began to patch together the territorial pieces that had once constituted the Chinese empire, geopolitics reasserted itself with a vengeance. However, coming to power in 1949 and establishing the China-Soviet alliance in 1950, the CCP was forced to accept the permanent separation of the Mongolian People's Republic from China. Their liberation enterprise managed to rein in only the "inner" part of Mongolia, which would serve as an ethnopolitical model for the CCP's "liberation" of Tibet.

After 1949, Beijing's policies toward Tibet, India, the United States, and the Soviet Union may be understood at once as the CCP's response to the changing contours of the Cold War and as the historical steps of China as a national state. In the latter frame of reference, Beijing's Tibetan and Indian problems were equally about the establishment of China's "domestic sovereignty" and the demarcation of China's "geo-body"; its dealings with the United States and the Soviet Union reflected China's normative stance in mediating between two opposing international societies and two political blocs. The ascendance of a communist movement to power in China, the rise of India as a newly independent national state, the continuation of Tibet's unique culture and

aristocratic-religious systems, and the entry of the United States as a destabilizing foreign influence—all these forces converged on Tibet in the 1960s. The result could only be an extremely complex, confusing, and tangled contest. In this contest the PRC managed to preserve its sovereignty in Tibet, but at the price of being forced to give up its initial intention to ground Chinese rule on inter-ethnic harmony in the region. In the short run, the ensuing deterioration of the Sino-Indian relationship seems to have been caused by the two governments' disagreement about how their common borders should be drawn. In the longer historical perspective, however, the dispute actually reflected a "progress" in the two countries' bilateral relationship, from imperial to national.

Beijing's "reforms" in Tibet after 1959 injected communist ideology into the Buddhist society. Chinese expansion into Tibet did not provoke the United States to act as it did in Korea, Vietnam, and the Taiwan Strait through direct confrontation and overt military intervention. Leaving aside other reasons, Washington's choice of a limited secret CIA war rather than open warfare should be understood in part in light of the fact that Beijing's consolidation of "domestic sovereignty" in Tibet did not violate the established international norm of differentiating domestic from foreign affairs. Beijing's abrogation of the Tibetan status quo ended the last historical legacy of the late Qing's "loose-rein" type of "dependency" policy. China took one more stride in nationalizing territoriality and thereby assumed a position comparable to that of European or American actors in the international scene. China's "becoming national" was completed at a time when enemies and friends in international politics were identified in popular understanding in terms of supranational ideologies. Ironically, it was China's supposed socialist ally, the Soviet Union that openly questioned Beijing's Tibet policy and the anti-Indian consequences. As indicated in the Mao-

Khrushchev quarrels over Tibet and India, the so-called principled basic line of the PRC diplomacy was framed by a national-state temperament that had taken shape since the 19th century, overshadowing the claims of communist ideology and fraternity. This paved the way for the China-Soviet conflict of the 1960s and China's "tacit alliance" with the United States from the 1970s. Also at work was a more profound historical logic—China's normative direction in international relations already afoot long before these events.

A last word concerns the surprising roles that Mongolian and Tibetan affairs have played in Cold War international history. After the Opium War, in the wake of China's defeat, Wei Yuan used his *Haiguo Tuzhi* (Maps and records of ocean states) to direct the attention of China's national defense from Inner Asia to the new threat from the Pacific. Then, the Russian and British efforts to control Mongolia and Tibet as part of their imperial management succeeded in different degrees in severing these territories' connections with China. Studies of 20th-century Chinese foreign relations and political history have given minimal attention to developments in China's western and northern borderlands. This paper has shown that the settlements of the Mongolian and Tibetan questions around and after the mid-20th century were not only central to the territorial and ethnographic formation of China as we know it today; they also constituted major threads in the fabric of international power relations.

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## Notes

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