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## **The Roof of the World: Comparing Nepal’s Role as a Buffer State to US Interests in Tibet During the Cold War**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of buffer states arose from the balance of power theory in the 18th century, and played an important role in many of the major conflicts occurring throughout the Cold War. Nepal is one of the lesser-known examples, acting as a safeguard between China and India. Nepal has held this role since the Qing dynasty, but there were arguably attempts to create another buffer state by the United States. This paper argues that during the Cold War, the US sought to create a buffer state out of Tibet, and uses Nepal as a counter to reveal key issues in Tibet’s international status that would prevent the region from operating in such a capacity. Two key dilemmas arise that prevent Tibet from ever filling such a role, the first being the international community's lack of recognition of Tibet as an independent state, and territorial disputes that would greatly reduce the ability of neutral existence.

## Introduction

Discussions of the Cold War are often centered on the major players, the United States and Soviet Union duking it out with the globe serving as their chessboard. The Vietnam War, the Korean War, the Afghanistan War, and the Sino-Indian War are some of the Cold War-era major conflicts that today have extensive academic literature written about them, their battles even living on through cinematic and literary adaptations. So often, the silent battles of the Cold War are overlooked, the clever strategic moves that, while at times born from paranoia, permanently altered the modern geopolitical landscape.

Buffer states are a shining example, stemming from the balance of power theory of the 18th century. Defined as a “small independent state lying between two larger, usually rival, states (or blocs of states),”<sup>①</sup> buffer states play significant roles in reducing the likelihood of direct conflict between the great powers, as seen during the Cold War. Some notable examples include West and East Germany (buffers between NATO and the Warsaw Pact), Mongolia (buffer between China and the Soviet Union), and North Korea (buffer between China and the Soviet Union and South Korea, Japan, and the United States).

There was another key buffer state during the Cold War, often overlooked despite its importance in South Asia. Nestled between China and India, Nepal acts as a barrier between the two as both debate territorial lines, a role it has filled since the Qing Dynasty and the time of the British raj. But there were attempts by the United States to create another buffer state in the Chinese territory: Tibet. While this ended up being unsuccessful, this history brings up a myriad of questions which can be answered by comparing Nepal’s role as a buffer state during the Cold War and the United States’ aspirations for Tibet as a buffer state. What was the difference in their role, why was Nepal able to operate as a buffer but not Tibet? Furthermore, if US aspirations in Tibet had been fulfilled, could the region even successfully act as a buffer state given Tibet’s role in the Sino-Indian war?

## Background on Tibet

The Tibetan region is cradled within the Kunlun Mountains to the north, the Karakoram range to the west, and the Himalayas to the south. With only its eastern border as somewhat traversable, for much of its existence Tibet has been isolated.<sup>②</sup> Even today there is only one railway reaching Tibet in China, the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, which was completed only just in 2006 and requires trains that are turbocharged to power through extreme altitude over railways permanently coated in permafrost.<sup>③</sup> The five airports present in the region required consistent trial and error before they were fully operational; the Lhasa Gonggar Airport for example is known as one of the world’s highest airports and it took nearly 9 years after it was first built in 1955 for a consistent and relatively safe flight path to the airport to be established.<sup>④</sup>

This isolation affected much of the Tibetan region’s interactions with the outside world, with Tibet largely overlooked by the international community until the Cold War. That’s not to say the region didn’t possess rich relations; take for example Tibet’s long and complex relationship with India dating back to the spread of Buddhism from India in the 7th century. Religious exchange was not the only dynamic bringing the two close, there were also a number of trade routes connecting them. Take for example the Tibet–Nepal salt trade route which passed between the

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<sup>①</sup> Partem, “The Buffer System in International Relations”, p4

<sup>②</sup> Barton, “Tibet and China: History, Insurgency, and Beyond.”, p2

<sup>③</sup> Tibet Travel and Tours, “Qinghai Tibet Railway: How and Why Build Tibet Train?”

<sup>④</sup> Aruo, “Engineering at the Top of the World”

Tibetan Plateau and the Middle Hills of Nepal on through to India, or the informal trade that existed between families of the Ladakh region and Tibet.<sup>①</sup>

Much later on, when the East India Trade Company successfully established trade with India, they sought to expand further north with Tibet capturing its attention. This eventually resulted in the emphasis of the Ladakh route and trade in tea, salt, and British textiles, with the signing of the Convention of Lhasa in 1904.<sup>②</sup> This convention was revised with explicit recognition of China's possession of Tibet in 1906 through the Convention Between Great Britain and China Respecting Tibet.<sup>③</sup> While the trade present between British India and Tibet never reached a significantly large scale, it did put in place significant movements of merchants and pilgrims between the Tibetan region and India.<sup>④</sup>

The treaties signed in 1904 and 1906 significantly shifted the Qing dynasty's attitude towards Tibet. They realized that should the Qing not enact explicit control, Tibet could easily be brought under British influence, in turn, giving them the high ground over the valuable Sichuan province.<sup>⑤</sup> This highlights the strategic value of Tibet for China; it serves not only as a gateway into South Asia, but also as a gateway into the country.

China's political relationship with Tibet began in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE following the unification of the region under King Songtsen Gampo.<sup>⑥</sup> There was a time when the boundaries of Tibet stretched into what is today known as Xinjiang and Sichuan, and many of the territories brought under Tibetan rule during Gampo's dynasty were also subordinate to the Tang dynasty.<sup>⑦</sup> While Tibet existed as a separate entity during this time, this changed during the Mongolian Empire (not yet the Yuan Dynasty), when in 1207 Tibet submitted to Ghengis Khan. The death of Ghengis Khan in 1227 led to Tibet ceasing tribute to the Mongols, and a relationship of religious teaching blossomed instead.<sup>⑧</sup> The Mongols provided protection and the Tibetans provided religious instruction. When the Yuan Dynasty was established in 1279 under Kublai Khan, Tibet was labeled as a part of its territories; however, Tibet's isolation led to weak control over the region. For example, in 1358 there was political strife in Tibet and the Yuan dynasty did not have resources to intervene.<sup>⑨</sup>

This disconnect between the ruling dynasty and the Tibetan region continued into the Qing Dynasty, with the Qing intervening at times in conflict but overall remaining distant until the shift in attitudes following the Convention of Lhasa. This administrative distance is a major point in the modern debate over Tibet's identity, and was a point taken advantage of during the Cold War when the strategic value of Tibet was realized by the Americans and the CIA.

When the CIA's Far Eastern Division turned its attention to Tibet, according to officer Sam Halpern the primary objective was not aiding the Tibetans but rather harassing and impeding the Chinese Communists. The decision of support was made in 1956, but US interactions with Tibet go back further.<sup>⑩</sup>

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① Bir; Good Gill, "India's Trade with Tibet", p79

② Fraser and Amthill. "Convention between Great Britain and Tibet, Signed September 7, 1904", p80–83

③ Fraser and Amthill. "Convention between the UK and China Respecting Tibet, Signed April 27, 1906", p78–80

④ Bir; Good Gill, "India's Trade with Tibet", p79

⑤ Goldstein, "The Snow Lion and The Dragon", p479

⑥ Goldstein, "The Snow Lion and The Dragon", p100

⑦ Ibid.

⑧ Goldstein, "The Snow Lion and The Dragon", p145

⑨ Ibid.

⑩ Knaus, "Orphans of the Cold War", p139

## On CIA Motivations

To discuss whether or not Tibet could operate as a buffer state during the Cold War, one must first discuss whether or not the United States ever sought Tibetan independence during that time. From 1957 to 1969, the CIA carried out covert operations in Tibet which cost over \$1.7 million and resulted in the training of a paramilitary force with approximately 2000 men.<sup>①</sup> Tibet arose as a place of strategic significance for US policy because “...US diplomatic and intelligence personnel believed that an active Tibetan resistance would simultaneously harass, divert, and embarrass Mao’s regime...”<sup>②</sup> But this motivation speaks of resistance, not an explicit establishment of an independent state. In fact, the United States’ relationship with Tibet has long been characterized by ambiguity.

US interest in Tibet first began in 1942 following a Japanese thrust which shut down the Burma Road, the only route through which the US, and other allies, could access China and provide aid to the Nationalists.<sup>③</sup> To carry out its first contact with Tibet, Franklin D. Roosevelt, the US President at the time, approved an Office of Strategic Services (OSS) mission coded as FE-2 to look into the potential value of Tibet and gain an understanding of the region in general as it was largely unknown to the United States at the time.<sup>④</sup>

Tibet was largely unwilling to provide its services during World War Two. There was a push for less Chinese presence and the British were also wary due to the previously mentioned treaties in ‘04 and ‘06; involving Tibet could remove its role as a buffer between China and British India.<sup>⑤</sup> Captain Ilya Tolstoy, led the mission which was largely uneventful besides the collection of intelligence regarding geography and the people, information which proved valuable years later.<sup>⑥</sup>

This interaction set the stage for a loose and ill-defined relationship with perhaps the most powerful country in the world at the time, tying into one key issue preventing the possibility of Tibet operating as a buffer state: the lack of international recognition of independence. These early interactions between the US and Tibet seemed at first to be “government-to-government,” but the careful wording used dissuades this. For example, Tolstoy did not arrive in Tibet empty handed. He had a letter from President Roosevelt himself which was directed to the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet. The Secretary of State at the time Cordell Hull pushed for Roosevelt to refer to the Dalai Lama in his religious capacity “rather than in his capacity of secular leader of Tibet, so as to not offend the Chinese Government which includes Tibet in the territory of the Republic of China.”<sup>⑦</sup> However, officials in Tibet were not clear on this distinction, with the letter being interpreted as a potential offer of US support for those in Tibet who sought separation from China.

Interest in Tibet dramatically sharpened in 1950, one year after Mao Zedong established the People’s Republic of China under the Communist Party. Two major events occurred in October of that year; first the PRC entered Tibet and began the process of annexation and secondly the decision of the PRC to intervene in the Korean conflict following the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950.

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<sup>①</sup> US Department of State, “Memorandum for the Special Group”.

<sup>②</sup> McMahon, “US Policy toward South Asia and Tibet during the Early Cold War”, p135

<sup>③</sup> Knaus, “Orphans of the Cold War”, p4

<sup>④</sup> Knaus, “Orphans of the Cold War”, p5

<sup>⑤</sup> Knaus, “Orphans of the Cold War”, p4

<sup>⑥</sup> Ibid.

<sup>⑦</sup> Goldstein, “The Snow Lion and The Dragon”, p651

The idea of Tibetan independence was not entertained when it was believed the Nationalists had a chance of winning against the Communists in China; Chiang Kaishek still maintained Chinese claims over the region, though explicit administration was put off by the Japanese invasion in 1937.<sup>①</sup> However, this shifted towards the end of the civil war and the eventual establishment of the PRC. The Korean War, and China's involvement, was viewed by many within the United States as "the opening phase in a coordinated campaign of militant communist expansion."<sup>②</sup> As a result, China was perceived as more opportunistic than previously expected, with its annexation of Tibet viewed as a potential step in the further spread of communism. Tibet's proximity to India, a country in which the United States was taking greater interest as a potential ally against communism, raised the hackles of American leadership.<sup>③</sup>

However, the isolation of Tibet prevented intervention for a few years. Gyalo Thondup, second eldest brother to the 14th Dalai Lama, had attempted previously to get American support of the scattered Tibetan resistance in its early years from 1952-1955. But in 1956, he traveled to the US consulate in Calcutta where he was for once welcomed by CIA operatives.<sup>④</sup> This 1956 meeting concluded with the CIA promising Gyalo to make Tibet independent from China in exchange for his support in organizing guerrilla units to fight against the People's Liberation Army (PLA). However, whether or not this was the explicit promise is disputed as there were challenges in translating. For one, the Tibetan language also did not have the terminology to distinguish concepts of resistance and independence which posed challenges for interpreters and maintained further ambiguity.<sup>⑤</sup> Secondly, the people present at these negotiations were operations officers, not legal experts. More than likely, they made promises without a full understanding of the ramifications.<sup>⑥</sup>

So, if there was never an explicit statement by the US to create an independent Tibet, how does one claim that this was an intention of the CIA operations? The answer lies in the ambiguity and ideology surrounding the plan. Tibet's legal status was a point of contention for the US State Department. There was a brief window during which more explicit support of independence could have been obtained prior to the signing of the Seventeen Point Agreement in 1951. At this point, the US government tried to persuade the Dalai Lama in India to go against the agreement which called for the return of the Tibetan government-in-exile.<sup>⑦</sup> Then, two weeks after the agreement was signed, Secretary of State Dean Acheson sent a cable to then US Ambassador to India Loy Henderson that Tibet should not accept the agreement, going so far as to offer weaponry and political support as long as India backed the US.<sup>⑧</sup> Henderson advised the Dalai Lama (then just fifteen years old) without consulting the State Department, telling him to seek asylum abroad and not to return home "while the danger exists that by force or trickery the Chinese Communists [will] seize Lhasa."<sup>⑨</sup> When this fell through, the Dalai Lama did end up returning to Tibet before fleeing again in 1959, the US State Department wrestled with how best to label Tibet, settling eventually on recognizing independence in a "factual" rather than legal sense.<sup>⑩</sup>

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① Goldstein, "The Snow Lion and The Dragon", p616

② McMahon, "US Policy toward South Asia and Tibet during the Early Cold War", p3

③ McMahon, "US Policy toward South Asia and Tibet during the Early Cold War", p3

④ Knaus, "Orphans of the Cold War"

⑤ Knaus, "Orphans of the Cold War", p319

⑥ Knaus, "Orphans of the Cold War", p319

⑦ Knaus, "Orphans of the Cold War"

⑧ Xu, "The United States and the Tibet Issue", p2

⑨ Knaus, "Official Policies and Covert Programs", p54

⑩ Knaus, "Orphans of the Cold War", p319

But Henderson's decision is important as it highlights the ideological sentiment that backs the idea of the US pushing for an independent, and buffer state, Tibet. Just three years prior to Tibet's annexation, The Truman Doctrine dramatically shifted US foreign policy. Also known as the policy of containment, President Harry Truman shifted away from the US' prior isolationist stance to instead say that the US would provide aid to democratic countries under the threat of communist influences in order to prevent the expansion of communism.<sup>①</sup> Henderson is just one of many officials in the US who took this ideology to heart, at one point stating that if the "Communists succeed in controlling all of China, or some equivalent far-reaching development takes place, we should be prepared to treat Tibet as independent to all intents and purposes."<sup>②</sup>

Thus, it can be argued that the US sought to use Tibet as a buffer state between "democracy" and China in a similar manner to East and West Germany's role for NATO and Warsaw. However, ultimately, the United States' attempt at establishing an independent Tibet failed. During the '50s, the United States lacked the capability to directly get involved in Tibet; it would not be until after the Korean War that the CIA would develop the ability to carry out long distance operations across the terrain present in that region.<sup>③</sup> If the United States wanted to use Tibet as a method of containment, this would require the United States to seek out an ally in space, leading to Tibet's neighbors India and Pakistan being suddenly catapulted to the top of America's priority list.<sup>④</sup> But India declined to serve as Washington's strategy point and while Pakistan originally stepped up in the Pakistan-America alliance of 1954, the conclusion of the East-Pakistan war and American attempts to establish ties with the People's Republic of China in the 1970s brought both the alliance and the operations in Tibet to a close.

### **On Nepal as a Buffer**

Having understood the intention of the United States to establish Tibet as a buffer state, the next question is whether or not such a decision was even feasible in the long term. To understand this, one can look at Tibet's neighbor Nepal, which has a long history of operating as a buffer state between China and India. When looking at Nepal and its history as a buffer state there are two important qualities at play that ensure its ability to operate as such. First, prior to the establishment as a buffer state Nepal already had an explicit recognition of independence. Second of all, there is a lack of long-term territorial disputes between Nepal, India, and China. Upon the annexation of Tibet by the PRC in 1950, Nepal's borders had long been determined.

First, consider the history of Nepal's role as a buffer state. At the time of Nepal's recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1955, Nepal was immensely reliant on its resource rich neighbor India.<sup>⑤</sup> Nepal and India had a relationship built on unequal footing due to India's vastly wealthier access to resources. This dynamic was exasperated with the signing of The Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950.<sup>⑥</sup> This treaty made it clear the reality of Nepal's future as a small nation trapped between two conflicting powers. Article 2 of the Treaty reads, "the two governments hereby undertake to inform each other of any serious friction or misunderstanding with any neighboring state likely to cause any breach in the friendly relations subsisting between the two governments," with neighboring state referring largely to China.<sup>⑦</sup>

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<sup>①</sup> Students of History, "Containment and the Truman Doctrine"

<sup>②</sup> Knaus, "Official Policies and Covert Programs", p55

<sup>③</sup> Knaus, "Orphans of the Cold War", p223

<sup>④</sup> McMahon, "US Policy toward South Asia and Tibet during the Early Cold War", p133

<sup>⑤</sup> Adhikari, "Between the Dragon and the Elephant", p85

<sup>⑥</sup> Adhikari, "Between the Dragon and the Elephant", p85

<sup>⑦</sup> India Treaty Series, "Treaty Between the Government of India and the Government of Nepal", Article 2

Nepal had been stuck in such a position before; it served as a buffer between the British raj-controlled India and Qing dynasty China, but this position came with Nepal's explicit independence. The international recognition of Nepal as a sovereign state took place following the signing of the Nepal–Britain Treaty of 1923,<sup>①</sup> which was recorded within the League of Nations, the first worldwide intergovernmental organization. Nepal's close relationship with India, and in turn the British during Britain's occupation of India, provided Nepal with more opportunities for diplomatic influence. That's not to say the topic of Nepal's independence hadn't been uncertain before.

Prior to 1923, and following the conclusion of the Anglo-Nepalese War, which lasted from 1814-1816, the degree of Nepal's independence was decided through the Sugauli Treaty. The treaty ceded parts of Nepal to British India, and the sixth point of the treaty stated that:

“The king of Nepal engages never to molest or disturb the king of Sikkim in the possession of his territories. If any difference shall arise between Nepal and Sikkim, it shall be referred to the arbitration of the East India Company.”<sup>②</sup>

This point clearly labels Nepal as more of a vassal state to the British than a fully autonomous power. However, even in this dynamic Nepal had consistent interactions such as participating in World War I that in turn set Nepal up for a more successful call for recognition of independence. After all, at the time the British Empire was at its territorial peak, especially in South Asia, such a negotiation would not have been easy.

The British incentive for the granting of independence can be found in the empire which lay on the other side of Nepal. By maintaining friendly relations with Nepal, the British could ensure the safety of India's northern border. While China had no incentive to encroach upon Nepal - the Qing dynasty was too strained during the British colonization of India and needed to concentrate efforts on maintaining Tibet - the unique relationship China had with Nepal would in turn encourage the British to seek out a barrier.

China's relationship with Nepal as a vassal state dates back to the Sino-Nepalese War which lasted from 1788–1792.<sup>③</sup> Fought largely over currency issues, Tibet had been using Nepali silver coins for centuries but had frustrations over decreasing quality, so it requested the assistance of the Qing dynasty. Sino-Tibetan forces eventually defeated Nepal leading to both Nepal and Tibet accepting the suzerainty of the Qing emperor. But while Tibet came further under the control of the Qing dynasty, Nepal maintained its autonomy despite needing to adhere to Qing dynasty terms and pay tribute to the state. This independence was further emphasized by China's absence during the Anglo-Nepalese war (1814-1816)<sup>④</sup> despite the treaty following the Sino-Nepalese War assuring Qing assistance should Nepal be faced with conflict. Furthermore, the Treaty of Thapathali, which was signed following the Nepal-Tibet War (1855–1856),<sup>⑤</sup> put in place an extradition policy between China and Nepal through Tibet, with murderers fleeing from Nepal into Tibet expected to be returned to Nepal and vice versa.

These treaties put in place an explicit recognition of independence, as seen with the conclusion of the Sino-Nepalese war and the later signed Treaty of Thapathali, both of which

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① Bhandari, “Nepal-Britain Treaty 1923: Nepal's Achievements and Legacies”

② Kumari and Kushwaha, “Sugauli Treaty 1816”, p42

③ Killigrew, “Some aspects of the Sino-Nepalese war of 1792”

④ Cartwright, “Anglo-Nepalese War”

⑤ Bhusal, “Historical Treaties and Agreements of Nepal and China- Tibet Relationship”

established Nepal as independent prior to the British colonization of India. The Nepal–Britain Treaty of 1923 did the same at an international level.

As stated earlier, Nepal, India, and China did not have long standing territorial disputes following the recognition of Nepal as independent. The lack of territorial disputes allowed for effective diplomacy and a longstanding coherent understanding of borders. For example, Nepal respected China’s claims following the annexation of Tibet in 1950, with diplomatic relations and the Five Principles, or Panchsheel, coming about with the expectation of Nepal respecting not only China’s claims to Taiwan, but also Tibet.<sup>①</sup> As such, Nepal became of strategic importance to China and was able to successfully operate independently as a buffer.

Tibet, however, does not possess the clarity of international recognition of independence that Nepal possesses, it is clearly a part of China and has long been recognized as such. However, if this were not the case, Tibetan “independence” would still carry with it the question of India’s territorial claims. If India were to obtain these claimed territories, would this leave China comfortable or would it breed nervousness as China’s move on Tibet did for India in 1955? This what-if scenario serves as the foundation for seeing whether or not Tibet could operate successfully as a buffer state.

### Tibetan Independence

Understanding that Tibet is today recognized as a part of China, questioning whether or not Tibet could operate as a buffer state requires looking at whether or not there was even potential for the idea of Tibetan independence to be recognized internationally during the Cold War. As previously discussed, Nepal had long possessed recognition of independence as seen in a variety of treaties brought to all parties and accepted by the international community. For Tibet however, even when the United States backed Tibetan guerilla fighters, whether or not the US was fully invested at a policy level in the mission of those fighting was shrouded in ambiguity.

China asserted its sovereignty over the Tibetan region on January 1, 1950 following the establishment of the PRC. Meetings between PRC and Tibetan representatives took place in Kalimpong, India in March, however attempts to persuade the Dalai Lama to discuss the status of Tibet fell through as Tibetan officials failed to negotiate further.<sup>②</sup> On October 7 of 1950, PLA troops entered the easternmost part of the region. This prompted Tibet to request military assistance from India followed by the Dalai Lama writing an appeal to the United Nations (UN) on November 11, 1950. The UN General Assembly condemned the Chinese invasion of the Tibetan region on November 18, 1950.<sup>③</sup> The Dalai Lama also turned to the United States and Western Europe, but no help was directly given, with a delegation eventually being sent to Beijing to negotiate Tibet’s return to China. This resulted in the two sides signing what became known as the “Seventeen-Point Agreement” (Agreement of the Central People’s Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet) in May of 1951.<sup>④</sup>

The lack of clear assistance provided shows an international understanding of the relationship between China and Tibet and the unwillingness to get directly involved in such a contentious issue of history, identity, and territory. However, it is necessary to get even more specific in just how much the international community outwardly agreed with China’s claim over Tibet. There are two internationally recognized documents that were made outside of Tibet prior

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<sup>①</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal MOFA, “Nepal-China Relations”

<sup>②</sup> University of Central Arkansas: UCA, “China/Tibet: 1950-present”

<sup>③</sup> Ibid.

<sup>④</sup> Goldstein, “The United States, Tibet, and the Cold War”



to 1957 and the official start of CIA operations in the region that efficiently set a standard for interaction with China. First, the 1912 Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China (ROC) and then the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement.

While the Constitution of the ROC and its territorial claims would not be applicable following the recognition of the PRC, how countries interacted with its claims is important to show how Tibet being a territory of China had already been an established global understanding; This despite attempts by some in Tibet to obtain explicit support of separating from China. Within Chapter 1 of the constitution, Article 3 states that “The territory of the Republic of China consists of the 22 provinces, Inner and Outer Mongolia, Tibet and Qinghai.”<sup>①</sup> However, with the Nationalists dealing with a civil war and the Japanese invasion, ROC authority over Tibet was weak. Furthermore, looking at the involvement of Tibet in WWII and efforts to have Tibet serve as a route for allies to provide military supplies to the Nationalists, Chiang Kaishek entertained the idea of independence stating that “if the Tibetans should at this time express the wish for self-government, China would, in conformity with our sincere traditions, accord it a very high degree of autonomy.”<sup>②</sup>

Viewing this time as an opportunity to gain recognition, Tibet attempted to send a delegation to Chiang, but was held up by British officials in India following their travel to New Delhi.<sup>③</sup> Then in 1946, Tibetan representatives were invited by future Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the Indian Council of Foreign Affairs to attend the New Delhi conference. Viewed as another opportunity to bring the concept of Tibetan independence to the international stage, this hope was put down following Chinese protests of a conference map showing Tibet as a separate country. India repainted the map overnight. Even with Tibet being able to exist at the conference under its own flag, there was a prioritization of the ROC’s claims. That same year, the British General Staff expressed, “From a short-term point of view there is no practicable means of aiding Tibet against a major enemy, and there is no real threat to India from that direction and the Government of India [which was still under British control] do not propose further to consider at present the possibility of offering military assistance to Tibet.”<sup>④</sup>

While delegations seeking an audience to entertain the idea of Tibetan independence were listened to at times, even against the cries of the ROC, in the long run the region was not viewed as useful beyond ideological standoffs. For example, in April of 1947 the US War Department rejected an idea of using Tibet as a rocket base stating, “On the facetious side, two possible uses for Tibet were envisaged: as a country offering great waste areas in which rockets could be tested, or as a final retreat (Shangri-la) to which peace-loving people could flee when atomic war breaks, for Tibet is too remote to be of significance in any war.”<sup>⑤</sup> If there was any opportunity for Tibet to gain international support, it was in the waning years of the Chinese Civil War. Once the PLA officially moved in under the PRC and solidified administrative control, any hope of genuine backing (again, beyond ideological motivations of individual actors) was moot. Especially because prior to the CIA intervention in Tibet, significant countries were already recognizing the PRC’s territorial claim in the region.

India upon its independence from the British had begun warming up to the idea of a Chinese-run Tibet, going so far as to dissuade the UN from debating the Tibet sovereignty question

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<sup>①</sup> China Copyright and Media, “Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China”

<sup>②</sup> Knaus, “Orphans of the Cold War”, p21

<sup>③</sup> Knaus, “Orphans of the Cold War”, p22

<sup>④</sup> Knaus, “Orphans of the Cold War”, p25

<sup>⑤</sup> Knaus, “Orphans of the Cold War”, p26

in 1950.<sup>①</sup> India sought a foreign policy of nonalignment, with Prime Minister Nehru distancing his country from great power politics and seeking positive relations with the US, China and the Soviet Union.<sup>②</sup> While there had been times where India seemingly supported Tibetan resistance, this changed in part following the signing of the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement. The agreement referred to Tibet specifically as a region of China and set new standards for trade between India and the region with this understanding of Tibet being under China. While attempts were made by the US to get India to work with them in the Tibetan region, this was eventually realized to be a roadblock. By October of 1950, it was understood by the US that India was unwilling to alienate China and that seeking military aid for Tibet through India was pointless. Nehru seemed unwilling to take steps that could jeopardize “India’s chosen role of best friend of Peking among the non-communist powers.”<sup>③</sup>

It was recognized across the board by this point that China had a strong claim in Tibet. An explicit separation at this time period would mean the breaking of treaties and general relations. If Tibet were to obtain “independence” during this time, the position likely would be on shaky grounds making its existence a point of conflict rather than accepted. Take for example conflict surrounding the Kashmir region between China and India and the extended Tibetan population in the provinces of Sichuan and Qinghai.

### **Territorial Claims**

A large part of Nepal’s success as a buffer state lies in its confidence in its borders. Unlike Nepal, Tibet has significant border disputes that exist both between India and China and between Tibet and China. Operating as a buffer state would require the resolution of these territorial conflicts, a goal that is easier said than done. There are three major territory dilemmas that prevent Tibet from being able to operate as a buffer: the Aksai Chin region to the east, the Arunachal Pradesh region to the west, and the concept of Greater Tibet which extends into Qinghai and Sichuan province.

The Arunachal Pradesh region is largely controlled by India and it shares a disputed 1,129 km border with Tibet. Claimed by both the ROC and PRC as South Tibet, the McMahon line was set up as the defining boundary between Tibet and India in 1914 through the Simla Accord.<sup>④</sup> This accord intended to separate Tibet into an “Outer” and “Inner” region, similar to the situation in Mongolia. However, this decision was made between British and Tibetan representatives, with the ROC pulling its support out. As China does not recognize this deal, the area of Arunachal Pradesh is labeled a part of China despite the British bringing it into India.<sup>⑤</sup> Because Tibetan representatives were involved in the establishment of this deal, it is possible that this is one territorial dispute that could be resolved. However, it would depend on whether or not Tibetans would accept British standards for borders.

The Aksai Chin region on the other hand proves more contentious. It is mostly controlled by China and lies within Xinjiang and Tibet. India claims it to be a part of its Leh District, referring to the Johnson Line boundary established in 1865 by the British, which put Aksai Chin within the Kashmir region.<sup>⑥</sup> China however refers to the Macartney-MacDonald Line which was established

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<sup>①</sup> Xu, “The United States and the Tibet Issue”, p2

<sup>②</sup> McMahon, “US Policy toward South Asia and Tibet during the Early Cold War”, p133

<sup>③</sup> McMahon, “US Policy toward South Asia and Tibet during the Early Cold War”, p133

<sup>④</sup> Bhardwaj, “The 1914 Simla Convention”

<sup>⑤</sup> Bhardwaj, “The 1914 Simla Convention”

<sup>⑥</sup> Synergia Foundation, “China’s Options for Aksai Chin”

in 1899, also by the British.<sup>①</sup> These border disputes have contributed to a variety of clashes between China and India, most notable being the Sino-Indian War in 1962. The war was triggered largely over China's construction of what is now known as G219, a highway which now connects the entirety of China's western and southern border but in the 1950s served as a connection between Xinjiang and Tibet.

A southwestern extension of the Tibetan plateau, this territory is a strong point of contention for both China and India. Should Tibet operate separately, the question becomes how this territory would be moved. Would the parts within the Tibetan region fall under "Tibet" or would a negotiation occur to shift the lands to India? Would China accept such an agreement, or would the territory continue to be disputed? Both India and China viewed each other as a potential threat of some kind during the Cold War which made China's annexation of Tibet controversial. While Nehru in large sought peaceful relations, he as an individual expressed irritation with and public criticism of the Chinese invasion of Tibet and, in 1950, the Indian foreign office sent a note to the Chinese foreign office which stated, "In the context of world events, invasion by Chinese troops of Tibet cannot but be regarded as deplorable and in the considered judgment of the Government of India, not in the interest of China or peace."<sup>②</sup>

If the Aksai Chin region serves as a point of conflict for India and Tibet, China would likely find concern in the concept of Greater Tibet. "Political" Tibet refers to the region now known as the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, which was annexed into the PRC in 1950. However, the Tibetan leadership in exile has long held the goal of the reunification of all Tibetan areas in China into a "Greater Tibet," referring to the provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan.<sup>③</sup> These provinces also contain significant Tibetan populations, which the exiled leadership claims were removed from Tibetan control in 1949, extending the annexation of Tibet back by one year.<sup>④</sup> Should Tibet have been established as a buffer state, how would the question of "Greater Tibet" be addressed? Sichuan for example would be vulnerable to Tibet, which itself acts as a barrier for China due to its difficult to traverse terrain. More than likely China would feel more on edge rather than assured with Tibet in between China and India, as Tibet's long-standing relationship with India would in turn increase the likelihood of cooperation to achieve the goal of a "Greater Tibet."

## Conclusion

Territorial conflict and a lack of international recognition are the two factors which distinguish Tibet from Nepal and severely inhibit the possibility of the region successfully acting as a buffer between China and India. Should the CIA intervention in Tibet have been successful, more than likely a myriad of new conflicts would have arisen rather than the "solving" of the Tibetan question. Furthermore, the prioritization of ideology over an in-depth understanding of the Tibetan region likely hindered the CIA operations in Tibet themselves as the goals of pushing against communism led to miscommunications between CIA officers and Tibetan rebels. Previously mentioned examples of this include the Gyalo talks in '56 which concluded with US officers seemingly promising Tibetan independence in exchange for support. However, those involved in the talks did not possess the authority to make such a promise and instead prioritized an ideological fight over the expectations of those seeking Tibetan independence.

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<sup>①</sup> War on the Rocks "How British Imperial History Does (and Doesn't) Shape the Sino-Indian Border Dispute"

<sup>②</sup> Mehrotra, "India's Tibet Policy"

<sup>③</sup> Goldstein, "The Snow Lion and The Dragon", p65

<sup>④</sup> Goldstein, "The Snow Lion and The Dragon", p65

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