



CANADA AND UNITED STATES BEHAVIOR REGARDING TIBET: THE POLITICS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THESE BILATERAL RELATIONS



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Abstract

The situation in Tibet has been a complex issue for the last six decades in world affairs. It has risen throughout the years a lot of concern and has called the attention of the international community. The issue becomes more acute when referring to human rights and the preservation of their cultural and religious heritage. In order to obtain a better understanding of the situation, this article will provide a general background of the case (actors, events and governmental policies), as well as a revision of both Canada and the United States position regarding this issue.

Keywords

Tibet, China, United States, Canada, human rights.

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RELACIONES INTERNACIONALES

China has been the focus of the international community in the last few decades for many reasons, most remarkably due to its economic performance. Nonetheless, it gained more momentum in human rights since Tiananmen Square in 1989; making this issue one of the most problematic in its relations with the international community (Svensson, 2002). The current essay will provide with a review of both the issue of Tibet as well as of the positions of both Canada and the United States, in order to understand the effects that this political issue has had in the commercial/economical bilateral relation.¹

According to the UN (2011), human rights are defined as the basic “rights and freedoms” that all people are entitled, “without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status²”. China has had human rights issues in many fronts, but probably, the one that has called lot of international attention has been Tibet (Dumbaugh, 2008; U.S. Department of State, 2011).

Tibet is one of the five Autonomous Regions of China (Echavarría Toro, 2009);³ nevertheless, the Tibetan culture expands beyond, forming what its called the “Tibetan Plateau”, which entails Tibetan people living in the neighboring regions of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan, and in Ladakh in India (Sperling, 2004). The total Tibetan population is approximately of 5.6 million people (U.S. Department of State, 2011). Buddhism has come to define the Tibetan cultural identity, influencing both the historical and current rapprochement with China (Smith, 2009).⁴

Figure 1: MAP OF THE TIBETAN PLATEAU



Source: Asia America Initiative, 2008

¹ This will be through a historical revision countries positions throughout the years

² The Declaration even goes further in Article 2, expressing that “no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.”

³ It was declared an Autonomous Region in 1965.

⁴ According to Sperling (2004), Tibetan religious figures played a central role in the religious and spiritual of emperors of several dynasties.

⁵ The PRC refers to the People’s Republic of China, who sees the invasion as a “liberation”. Additionally, here lays a political contradiction for the government of Tibet; by that time, other Tibetan provinces outside the Dalai Lama’s jurisdiction, had already been incorporated to the PRC, since they had been invaded since 1949.

⁶ Dharamshala is the place where the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGIE) was established after the 1959 revolts, and where the Dalai Lama resides.

Tibet has been a complex issue since the 1950’s. Its status regarding China had not been very clear until that point either. This changed during the 1911 revolution, moment where they declared a *de facto* independence, taking advantage of the end of Qing’s dynasty (Carlson, 2004). It lasted less than 40 years, being “invaded” by the PRC forces; act denounced in 1950 (Sperling, 2004).⁵

From that point on, the political relations between Lhasa, Beijing and Dharamshala have been all but simple and permanently cordial.⁶ Many things have happened over the past sixty years, mostly in terms of political

confrontations and humanitarian crisis that have resounded internationally. The political situation is a spiderweb of historical and ideological issues that have not allowed to come to an end to a very publicized situation (Bob, 2002).⁷

Human rights have been at the center of the debate. Even since the beginning of this last stage in the Tibet-Beijing relations, concerns about human rights violations emerged. The main concerns refer to the jailing and persecution of people who is “peacefully expressing their views, holding religious beliefs not sanctioned by the state, advocating for democratic reform and human rights, and defending the rights of others” (Amnesty International, 2011: 104), in other words, torture, political prisoners, and lack of religious freedoms.⁸ During the 1950’s and the beginning of the 1960’s the attention revolved around the effects of the 1959 revolts: genocide against the Buddhist religious groups and violation of basic human rights of other Tibetan civilians (Bradsher, 1969).⁹ The reports have continue, and they have practically never ceased to exist.¹⁰ A very interesting thing to mention here is that China in fact considers that since 1950, “human rights in old Tibet bears no comparison with the situation in Tibet today” (China Government, 1998).¹¹

Despite the complexity of this issue, the intention of this work is not to go deeper into who is right or wrong, instead, is to understand which has been that position of both Canada and the United States toward the situation in Tibet.

It is clear that Canada has not been the exception to China’s world influence, on the contrary, not only in economical terms they are now interlinked. More than 1.3 million Canadians are from Chinese origin and many Chinese exchange students choose Canada for their institutions (Government of Canada, 2010). Nevertheless, the economic element of the relation is also important: by 2009, China was the second largest trade partner for Canada, only superseded by the United States, the historical main partner (Statistics Canada, 2011). In terms of human rights, they have been an important issue within governance, one of the areas that are considered as priority for the Canada-China bilateral relations (Government of Canada, 2010). Additionally, as by 2005, nine bilateral human rights dialogue meetings have taken place since 1997. Most importantly, “the general objective has been to influence change in China’s human rights practices” (Charles Burton and Associates, 2006: 3).¹² Canada’s believe has been that engagement and not isolation would be more effective in this issue. This means that cooperation has become a multilevel issue, affecting not only the political, or the economic front of a country, but also the cultural and the social. Despite of this, there is a feeling that “there are limits on the depth and range of Sino-Canadian cooperation”, limits that include issues such as “Tiananmen, Tibet, or Taiwan” (Evans, 2006: 290). These limits, however, apparently, have not been reached.

In addition to this and considering Canada’s attachment to the rule of law and to multilateral diplomacy, Canadians that oppose to a deepening of relations with China tend to base their arguments in issues of, among others, human rights and religious freedoms (Evans, 2006). These two ideas can clearly be applied to Tibet. Therefore, if the situation there gets particularly sensitive in terms of human rights violations, Canadian civil society may exercise pressure, and this pressure may be reflected, in sectors such as trade and tourism with China.

After a complicated beginning of diplomatic and political relations, China has come to be today the second commercial partner of the U.S., just as for Canada (USITC, 2011). Nevertheless, the evolution of this prosperous commercial relation does not reflect all the political issues that have emerged in these 40 years of history (Echavarría Toro, 2009). Tibet was a clear example; until the normalization of diplomatic relations in the 1970’s, the PRC considered that the United States was supporting illegal activities in the region (Sautman, 2005). Since the end of the 1980’s, the issue of

⁷ According to Baogang & Sautman (2005), the main reasons for the little progress in the situation are: 1) The PRC is waiting for the death of the Dalai Lama; 2) According to Beijing, Tibet already has autonomy; 3) Fear that the Communist Party will loose control if the Dalai Lama returns to Tibet; and 4) Beijing believes that the Dalai Lama has no met their preconditions (preconditions referring to accept that Tibet is part of China as well as Taiwan, for example).

⁸ Up to this year, the reports about human rights violations remain; according to Amnesty International (2011), sooner this year, in April, at least 11 monks were detained after the death of another monk that set himself in fire as a protest against the government’s politics in the region. This organization highlights the risk they face of mistreatments and torture.

⁹ 1959 symbolized the beginning of the revolts and of the protests in Tibet, as a consequence of Chinese suppression, and also the moment when the Dalai Lama went to India as well as the beginning of the Tibet exiled community.

¹⁰ INGO’s such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and organizations of lesser reach fighting for Tibet liberation have been spokespersons of what’s going on.

¹¹ For the Chinese government, what the 1959 “Democratic Reform” did was to emancipate the millions of serfs and slaves that were under the control of the Dalai Lama (Warren W. Smith, 2008)

¹² This has been an intergovernmental initiative, and has a bilateral and a regional element. The former meets annually and comprises mid-level official from ministries and agencies, NGOs and the academy. The latter works jointly with Norway, and each one hosts up to 20 countries from the south and the east of Asia in order to exchange views on issues of human rights.

RELACIONES INTERNACIONALES



Tibet gained a lot of preponderance within the American society and political policymakers, thanks to the “lobby” made by both the Dalai Lama and the exiled community (Dumbaugh, 2009).¹³ This reached its highest point during the Clinton administration, who even received the Dalai Lama a couple of times for “informal” visits (Carlson, 2004). During the next presidential periods, the support was not as explicit, yet it never ceased, resulting in the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002. Among its objectives, are the preservation of their distinct culture; human rights issues, religious freedom, political freedom and economic development, and creates the figure of the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues in the State Department (Dumbaugh, 2009).

Looking in retrospective, the US Congress has “adopted measures to support the Tibetan cause”, always emphasizing in the role of the US as a mediator in the negotiations between Beijing and the Dalai Lama (Dumbaugh, 2008: 12). Since 1979, the policies have been of engagement and there have been several legislations to tackle, in some way, the difficulties that the Tibetans suffer (Dumbaugh, 2008)¹⁴. Unfortunately, the reports on human rights violations remain. The Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for China of the State Department (2011), confirms it in this sense.¹⁵

In both, Canada and the U.S., with Tibet there was never a clear connection between politics and economics, at least in political statements and news anything was found. Even though some pressure has been exercised, it has never come to the point to handled either bilateral relation. Canada has been subtler in the way it has handle things, coherently with the way it has conducted its foreign affairs. The United States, in part as a consequence of being one of the focuses of the “international campaign” (Dumbaugh, 2008), has been more proactive, which can be proven by the Trade Partnership Agreement of 2002. Notwithstanding their historical concern for human rights, China has become much of an economic leading world player, and it does not seem possible that either Canada or the United States be willing to seriously jeopardize the well being of their bilateral (commercial) relation.

There has never been such a strong pronouncement as to fear a negative consequence or collateral effect in the commercial arena. Nonetheless, economic sanctions are indeed used in the world nowadays. However, the weight of the counterpart (China) has to be taken into account as to balance who would be the most affected. This balance is certainly made by those who made the decisions in Washington and Ottawa, when considering how to react to Tibet’s situation.

¹³ This policy began in 1987 with the so-called “International Campaign”, made by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exile community. Its intention was to obtain Western (mostly U.S.) support in order to pressure Beijing for political concessions.

¹⁴ These legislations include scholarships; educational and cultural exchange programs, funds for humanitarian, food and medical purposes, and assistance for non-governmental organizations that work to preserve the Tibetan cultural heritage, among others.

¹⁵ Many prisoners have been denied counsel of his choosing, political prisoners remain in custody, access to means of communication are being disrupted and monitored, there is partial access to foreign journalists, freedom of expression continues to be jeopardized by imprisonment.

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