

Proxy Warfare on the Roof of the World: *Great Power Competition* *Lessons from Tibet*

by Steve Ferenzi

A sponsor may disrupt or coerce an adversary with only a small investment in a proxy force without crossing the threshold to traditional armed conflict. Proxy employment represented a significant component of U.S. policy during the Cold War. As the United States once again relies on this tool to compete with peer state adversaries, it is beneficial to examine past engagements that may inform better ways to outsource national security objectives to proxy forces. Central Intelligence Agency support to anti-Chinese resistance forces in Tibet, the “Roof of the World,” from 1956 to 1974 accomplished the limited objective of disrupting Chinese regional ambitions as part of the global effort to contain Communist expansion. However, success came at the expense of Tibetan casualties and failure to achieve the resistance’s objective of an independent Tibet. This case study offers lessons for future proxy engagements in establishing mechanisms that facilitate proper proxy selection, mitigate deviation from sponsor goals, and optimize proxy capabilities.

Surrogates and Proxies—Then and Now

President Eisenhower characterized proxy warfare as the “cheapest insurance in the world.”¹ He recognized the potential to accomplish national security objectives without direct U.S. military involvement by making relatively small investments in surrogate forces. Proxy employment therefore became a significant plank of U.S. national security policy during the Cold War against both the Soviet Union and China. Today, proxy warfare again provides the United States a way to compete below the level of armed conflict by expanding options to compel adversary behavior change and deter undesirable actions.² Central Intelligence Agency support to the Tibetan resistance against China from 1956 to 1974 represents a crucial Cold War proxy engagement that may inform better ways to outsource national security objectives to proxy forces.

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Lack of embedded advisors reduces control over the proxy.
A sponsor's direct advisory presence on the ground signals commitment to the proxy engagement and affords increased opportunity to effect favorable outcomes, but it increases the risk of sponsor exposure.
Using intermediaries reduces sponsor control.
A sponsor's attempt to further distance itself from the conflict and/or spread cost burdens by working through intermediaries will reduce its control over the proxy in proportion to the divergence between their operational objectives. Intermediate proxies often have different goals than the primary sponsor. This imposes significant constraints on a sponsor's ability to optimize proxy effectiveness.
Sponsor control based on resource provision is proportional to the value a proxy places on material support.
Making resources contingent on battlefield effectiveness, equipment accountability, and human rights compliance is not a surefire mechanism to ensure proxy obedience if other cost/benefit calculations dominate the proxy's decision-making process.
Political considerations directly impact both the strategic and tactical aspects of proxy employment.
Divorcing the larger political and strategic considerations that prompted the initial proxy engagement from actual proxy employment on the ground may significantly reduce its effectiveness. Proxy warfare requires an integrated policy approach.

Figure 1. Lessons from CIA support to the Tibetan resistance against China

This case study addresses two key aspects of proxy warfare: 1) force generation and “enabler” efforts without embedded advisors accompanying the proxy, and 2) the advantages and disadvantages of conducting proxy warfare through regional intermediaries.³ This case also demonstrates adverse proxy selection and agency slack, where constraints on the ability to select the optimal proxy and induce it to perform as intended enabled the Tibetans to act contrary to U.S. preferences.⁴ American successes and failures in its support to the Tibetan resistance provide a number of valuable lessons to consider for future proxy employment, both overt and covert. These lessons may apply throughout an entire generic proxy life cycle regardless of the specific temporal and political circumstances; the most significant are summarized in Figure 1 and expanded upon in the final section.

Overview

The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) conducted a covert action campaign against China in Tibet from 1956 to 1974 by providing support to the indigenous resistance movement that formed in response to the Chinese Communists' invasion. The CIA's objective was to disrupt China within the framework of the larger policy of containing global Communist expansion. The CIA specifically aimed to reduce China's influence and capabilities by supporting a viable resistance inside Tibet and an autonomous Tibet under the Dalai Lama's leadership.⁵ This proxy engagement, code-named “ST CIRCUS,” achieved moderate success by disrupting Chinese regional plans, tying up the People's Liberation Army occupation force, and shaping the political discussion concerning Tibet that continues to this day.

Cold War political dynamics caused the United States to withdraw material support in 1969,

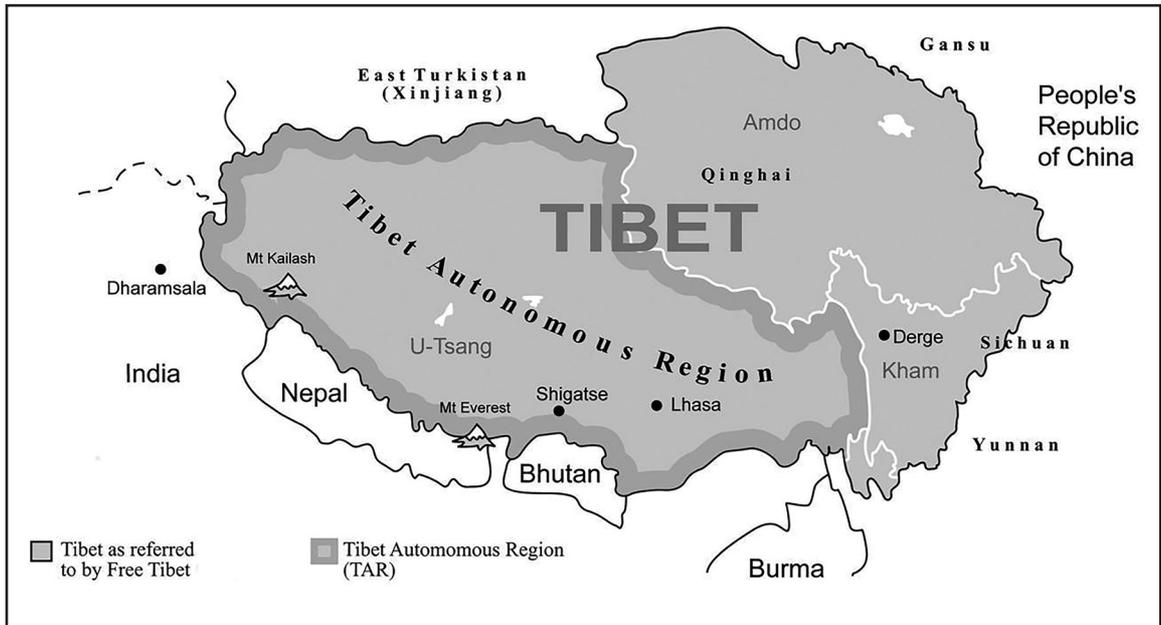


Figure 2. Map of Tibet (Source: Free Tibet)

demonstrating that sponsorship of the Tibetan proxy had fit into America’s larger policy of destabilizing Communist regimes at the expense of the indigenous movement’s political aspirations. The United States officially severed ties in 1974 by cutting the covert subsidy it had been paying to the Dalai Lama to support the government-in-exile, as rapprochement with China became the Nixon administration’s priority.

Background

Nearly three miles above sea level, the Tibetan Plateau is known as the “Roof of the World.”⁶ Tibetans have historically maintained their independence through geographic separation afforded by harsh terrain and a priest-patron relationship whereby spiritual mentorship held the power of mainland China at bay. This association became a formalized power structure in the 16th century when Mongol chieftain Altan Khan bestowed the honorific title of “Dalai Lama” on a prominent Buddhist monk, establishing the religious and temporal authority of subsequent Dalai Lamas.⁷

The Qing Dynasty took control of the Ambo and Kham regions of Tibet between 1724 and 1728. Tibet declared its autonomy in 1913 following the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty, a situation that lasted until the Chinese Communist Party seized power in 1949. Intent on consolidating what it considered Chinese territory, the People’s Liberation Army dispatched 20,000 troops to “realize the peaceful liberation of Tibet” and defeated the Tibetan army in Kham in 1950.⁸

The Chinese Communist Party subsequently established administrative control of villages throughout the eastern region of Kham and eventually all of Tibet. Extensive reforms based on Chinese revolutionary ideology stripped local leaders of power and disrupted traditional Tibetan life, causing villagers across the social spectrum to rise in protest. The armed Tibetan resistance began as a series of independent uprisings in opposition to Chinese policy in Kham, which turned into a widespread revolt in 1956 when Chinese forces bombed four monasteries and killed thousands of monks and civilians.⁹

The Dalai Lama's failure to achieve an acceptable peace with China and the growing popular resistance encouraged the Dalai Lama's elder brother, Gyalo Thondup, to contact the CIA in Calcutta in 1956.¹⁰ The first phase of U.S. sponsorship of Tibetan proxies against the Chinese consisted of only six Tibetan refugees selected by the CIA and Gyalo Thondup to receive training and serve as its initial agents.¹¹ The official armed Tibetan resistance movement formed in June 1958 after local leaders decided to unite their formerly separate elements into a unified army of roughly 5,000 volunteers, taking the name *Chushi Gangdruk* in reference to the "four rivers and six ranges" of Kham.¹² The last façade of Tibetan autonomy evaporated after the Dalai Lama fled from Lhasa to India in March 1959.

Sponsor and Proxy Goals

Sponsor-proxy engagements took the form of a complex relationship between the United States, India, and the Tibetan resistance. The United States served as the primary sponsor, using the Tibetan proxy as a tool in the global fight against Communism. India served as a regional sponsor and intermediate U.S. proxy, providing sanctuary for the Tibetan government-in-exile, a joint operations center, and guerrilla training areas, and it ultimately siphoned off Tibetans meant for the resistance to use as a means to protect India's vulnerable northern border with China.

The United States

The United States took little interest in Tibet until Chinese Communist forces invaded in 1950. Previous interaction consisted of a secret reconnaissance mission executed by the Office of Strategic Services in 1942 to assess the feasibility of using Tibet as a resupply route to China after Japanese forces cut the Burma Road. This expedition laid the groundwork for future U.S. involvement, but also foreshadowed

the complex relationship that would develop throughout the Tibetan resistance period.¹³

As a plank in the global effort to contain Communist expansion, U.S. sponsorship of the Tibetan resistance was a perfect opportunity to confront Communism by means other than direct and costly military intervention.¹⁴ Consistent with NSC 5429/5, the United States had an interest in "keep(ing) the rebellion going as long as possible."¹⁵ A memorandum to the 303 Committee for covert actions oversight defined the program objectives as:

"toward lessening the influence and capabilities of the Chinese regime through support, among Tibetans and among foreign nations, of the concept of an autonomous Tibet under the leadership of the Dalai Lama; toward the creation of a capability for resistance against possible political developments inside Tibet; and the containment of Chinese Communist expansion"¹⁶

U.S. ideological commitment to freedom and the resistance's practical utility as a disruptive mechanism kept U.S. interest in Tibet relatively static until President Nixon's rapprochement with China in 1972. In light of this political shift, support to the Tibetan resistance undermined efforts to establish China as a counterbalance to the Soviet threat, and the United States subsequently phased out its support completely in 1974.¹⁷

India

Indian support to the Tibetan resistance fluctuated based its regional position vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. India initially recognized China's sovereignty over Tibet, attempting to maintain cordial relations in order to cultivate Beijing as an offset to Pakistan, but it also built relations with Tibet in order to improve border security after China's invasion of Kham in 1950.¹⁸ India reversed its position in 1959 by

granting the Dalai Lama asylum and hosting a Tibetan government-in-exile after the brutal Chinese shelling of unarmed Tibetans forced him to flee.¹⁹ The 1962 Sino-Indian War, in which China seized 14,500 square kilometers of Indian Kashmir, created an alignment of interests between the United States and India in using the Tibetans as a proxy against China.²⁰ The Tibetans represented a means of guarding India's vulnerable northern border and a potential force for attaining an independent Tibet that would facilitate long-term security in the Himalayas.²¹

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The establishment of the Combined Operations Center in New Delhi in 1964 formalized U.S.-Indian-Tibetan cooperation, but India subsequently attained more influence over operations as the joint command was based on their soil.²² U.S.-Indian relations deteriorated in the mid-1960s as India aligned itself with the Soviet Union in response to the increased threat embodied in Mao's Cultural Revolution and China's successful test of a medium-range nuclear ballistic missile in 1966. This new relationship adversely affected cooperation between the United States and India concerning guerrilla operations and assistance to the Tibetan government-in-exile. Coupled with drawdown of U.S. covert support and perception of the guerrillas' ineffectiveness, India decreased most of its joint paramilitary operations by the spring of 1967.²³

Tibetan Resistance

The Tibetan resistance sought to achieve territorial independence from a Communist China that posed an existential threat to the Tibetan way of life. Mao's declaration to the

Dalai Lama that "religion is poison" was confirmed as early as 1955 when the People's Liberation Army implemented an atheist education system to supplant Buddhism, private and monastic property confiscation, and public humiliations and executions that incited the initial local protests.²⁴ The 1966 Cultural Revolution carried this to its completion as the Red Guards set about destroying the last vestiges of Tibetan identity.²⁵

According to the Dalai Lama, "The CIA was pursuing a global policy against Communist China, while we were opposing Communist aggression in our country; our basic aims did not clash, so we accepted it (assistance from the CIA)."²⁶ Gompo Tashi, the leader of the *Chushi Gangdruk*, stated in a letter requesting support from President Eisenhower in 1959:

"We Tibetans have determined to fight to the last against the Chinese Communists... as there is no alternative left for us except to fight. We see no other Powers other than the United States which is capable of giving us help in every respect to free Tibet from the domination of Red China."²⁷

Recruitment through Employment

CIA support to the Tibetan resistance began as a pilot program in 1957 to train small teams in guerrilla tactics and intelligence collection outside of Tibet. The CIA inserted these elements back into Tibet and logistically supported them with covert U.S. air assets. This effort expanded to train resistance fighters on a larger scale in the United States prior to insertion back into Tibet to conduct operations. In the early 1960s, the CIA switched from parachuting agents into Tibet to supporting the resistance at the Mustang base in Nepal. By 1968 the United States began to phase out its support as Chinese military control became so great that further guerrilla operations would be futile. In the summer of 1974 the United States officially severed ties with the resistance by cutting the covert subsidy it had

been paying to the Dalai Lama in support of the government-in-exile.²⁸

The CIA also executed a parallel effort with the Indian Intelligence Bureau to train and equip Tibetans for service in the Indian Special Frontier Force, a unit designed to conduct intelligence gathering and commando operations against China following the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Other efforts included the education of Tibetans at Cornell University and the establishment of Tibetan advocacy groups in the United States, India, and Europe.

Pilot Team Operations

In February 1957 six Tibetan Khampas were selected from a pool of 27 refugees in India to serve as a “pilot team” that would be tasked with infiltrating Tibet and assessing the state of the resistance. Gyalo Thondup, the Dalai Lama’s brother, chose these candidates, and the CIA flew them from East Pakistan (currently Bangladesh) to Saipan in the Northern Mariana Islands for training. Three CIA teams instructed the Khampas on espionage techniques, Morse code and radio communications, and guerrilla warfare, condensing a full year curriculum into approximately four months.

The CIA inserted the pilot team without U.S. advisors from East Pakistan via parachute, using covert air platforms with Polish pilots for deniability. This aerial delivery portion of ST CIRCUS was subsumed under the codename ST BARNUM. (ST was the CIA country code for East Asia, including Tibet.) Though it sustained three fatalities throughout the course of its activities, the pilot team linked up with the resistance and reported to the CIA. After determining that the resistance was operational, the CIA decided to proceed with material support and to train a second group of Tibetans.²⁹

U.S.-Based Training Expansion

Training expansion began with a second contingent of Tibetans consisting of ten Khampa refugees that mirrored the ethnic composition

of the first group. The training location moved from tropical Saipan to Camp Hale, Colorado, in order to better replicate the elevation of Tibet. The CIA implemented a ten-month pipeline to develop a trained Tibetan cadre that would have a multiplier effect for the resistance movement. While successive airborne teams succeeded in establishing a network among existing resistance elements and organizing resupply through the CIA, People’s Liberation Army military operations and U.S. domestic political constraints resulted in significant guerrilla casualties. The United States prohibited overflights after the downing of a U-2 spy plane in Soviet airspace in 1960. This, coupled with the potential for political fall-out resulting from covert operations during the 1960 presidential elections, caused the United States to suspend resupply to the guerrillas for almost a year.³⁰

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By late spring of 1960 all the airborne teams operating inside Tibet were non mission capable. Of the 49 agents dropped into Tibet since 1957, 37 had been killed, one was captured, and one surrendered. The remainder escaped back to India. Resistance leadership attributed the overall failure to several factors: the guerrillas would not listen to the cadres’ advice to disperse, and continued to engage the Chinese in frontal assaults; the resistance could not sustain itself in the infertile countryside where it resided; and there was no communication between the different operational areas to synchronize their efforts. These losses forced the CIA to reevaluate its overall strategy for resistance support.³¹

From 1964 to 1967, the CIA inserted 25 additional elements classified as “radio teams”



Figure 3. Mustang Kingdom in Nepal (Source: Tibet Truth)

along the border primarily in central and western Tibet for the purpose of intelligence collection. Finding little support among the local population, most of the teams returned to India within weeks. By 1967 the CIA terminated this mission as it became evident that the risks were not worth the scattered intelligence the teams were delivering.³²

Approximately 250 Tibetans received instruction under the U.S.-based training program until its termination in November 1964. The Fiscal Year 1964 budget allocated \$585,000 (approximately \$4.9 million in 2019 dollars)³³ for this program annually, with \$400,000 for training expenses in Colorado and \$185,000 for the covert air transportation from Colorado to India.³⁴

External Sanctuary in Nepal

Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang, a successful trader from a reputable family who enjoyed support from Tibetan government leaders loyal to the Dalai Lama, began organizing a resistance in 1956 originally called *Chushi Gangdruk* (in reference to the “four rivers and six ranges” of Kham).³⁵ Gompo oversaw its reorganization into the unified resistance movement named

the National Volunteer Defense Army in 1958. Overwhelmingly composed of ethnic Khampas, this name change was an intentional effort to break from *Chushi Gangdruk’s* regional overtones and appeal to all Tibetans. The National Volunteer Defense Army suffered from a Khampa brigand stereotype held by many central Tibetans due to Lhasa’s and the Tibetan army’s public opposition to anti-Chinese resistance, resulting in little local popular support in central Tibet.³⁶

Initial CIA support to the National Volunteer Defense Army consisted of aerial resupply coordinated by the pilot teams and the paramilitary training imparted by the teams to the resistance elements. By mid-April 1959 Chinese troops and air power overwhelmed the National Volunteer Defense Army, forcing the leadership to seek sanctuary elsewhere while local resistance elements remained to disrupt Chinese supply routes along the Sichuan-Lhasa highway and the highway from Lhasa to Qinghai. In an effort to revive the resistance movement, Gompo proposed they regroup in the bordering Mustang kingdom of north-central Nepal, from which they could then operate inside Tibet. The CIA approved a plan to take 2,100 men from

the scattered National Volunteer Defense Army, reconsolidate them in Mustang as 300-man elements, and send them back across the border to conduct guerrilla attacks. The plan envisioned seven groups operating independently in Tibet with support in the form of aerial resupply and trained leaders.³⁷

A major problem developed as word spread quickly of the newly established guerrilla base, drawing an immediate influx of 2,000 volunteers from local road construction gangs instead of the planned groups of 300. This overwhelmed the capacity to feed, supply, and train the men, and Indian newspapers began a series of articles about the exodus that exposed the intended covert nature of the operation. The Mustang operation eventually continued as the Kennedy administration took over and overflights resumed. The guerrillas achieved limited success by attacking isolated Chinese military camps and disrupting major highway supply routes, forcing China to post one division in the area and diverting traffic from western Tibet to the Qinghai-Xingjian highway 300 kilometers to the north. Captured documents also provided significant intelligence illustrating the serious Chinese governance problems that resulted from Mao's Great Leap Forward.³⁸

Tension built as Washington vacillated between the utility of maintaining the Mustang force as a capability against China and the potential dangers it presented to ongoing diplomatic efforts to achieve Tibetan independence. As a result, the CIA did not fully resource the resistance to execute its intended operations, a situation further exacerbated by internal Tibetan leadership schisms and their lack of desire and inability to establish bases across the border as per the original plan. Failure to put CIA advisors on the ground and Mustang's geographical isolation ensured that the Mustang commander, Baba Gen Yeshe, "was free from scrutiny and, as such, a general who was accountable to no one."³⁹ By 1968 the

guerrilla force at Mustang consisted of 1,800 men, and no efforts had been made to recruit new members since the original 1961 influx.⁴⁰ Annual operating costs to support approximately 2,100 guerrillas at the Mustang base were budgeted at \$500,000 dollars (approximately \$4.2 million in 2019 dollars).⁴¹

Political will for continuing support to the guerrillas decreased as new U.S. government leadership began to consider the eight year Mustang project an outdated commitment. The CIA informed Gyalo Thondup in early 1969 that it was withdrawing support for the Mustang force. A number of resistance elements continued operations until Nepal began an anti-Khampa campaign denouncing the Mustang force. In 1974 Nepal forced the guerrillas to surrender their arms in response to the pressure on Nepal's king by Mao beginning in 1973.⁴²

Special Frontier Force

The 1962 Sino-Indian War precipitated closer U.S.-Indian ties. The CIA and the Indian Intelligence Bureau collaborated in the creation of a Tibetan guerrilla force known officially as the Special Frontier Force, and more popularly as "Establishment 22." Gyalo Thondup was responsible for the initial recruitment of Tibetan exiles that would eventually number approximately 12,000, presuming that these men would only conduct resistance activities in Tibet. However, India intended to use the Special Frontier Force to protect India's borders if war with China were to break out again, and India did not authorize them to cross into Tibet for the purpose of confronting the Chinese. After six months of basic training identical to the Indian army's, the CIA supplemented their instruction with commando and guerrilla warfare tactics, sabotage, and explosives in the Indian town of Chakrata. The Indians sustained the Tibetans' motivation by maintaining the illusion that the troops were preparing for their own war of liberation.⁴³

The United States, India, and the Tibetan resistance established the Combined Operations Center in New Delhi in 1964 to assume direction of the Camp Hale operations and the guerrilla operations at Mustang, but the Indians exercised sole command over the Special Frontier Force. Friction developed in trying to define the role of the Mustang force in relation to Special Frontier Force operations, as well as the overall objectives of the three member parties.⁴⁴

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By 1971 direct CIA contact with the Special Frontier Force had almost ceased. Against the backdrop of escalating Indian-Pakistani tensions, India employed 3,000 members of the Special Frontier Force in Operation EAGLE, participating in direct combat against Pakistani forces in East Pakistan as part of India's efforts to facilitate future Bangladesh's independence. As tensions with Pakistan eased by the late 1970s, the Special Frontier Force received a new internal counterterrorism mission, and it continues today as part of the Indian military establishment.⁴⁵

Non-Combat Efforts

The United States led additional efforts to support the Tibetan resistance in a nonviolent capacity. The CIA selected twenty junior Tibetans to study at Cornell University from 1964 to 1967, believing it should make "educational investments in the future" to develop the human infrastructure necessary for the resistance to establish a governing body.⁴⁶ Graduates went on to serve within the Tibetan government-in-exile, as well as the Tibetan language section of All-India radio and the *Tibet Freedom* magazine. This program ceased in 1967 due to restrictions

that prohibited the CIA from funding political programs in the United States.⁴⁷

The CIA also supported the establishment of "Tibet Houses" in Geneva, New York City, and New Delhi. Their purpose was to unofficially represent the Dalai Lama and "to maintain the concept of a separate Tibetan political identity."⁴⁸ The Tibet House in New York City worked closely with Tibetan supporters in the United Nations to lobby for their cause and served as a coordinating point for resettling 500 Tibetan refugees throughout Europe.⁴⁹ The Tibet House in New Delhi, considered one of the more enduring tangible contributions to the Tibetans, remains a major attraction for scholars and tourists today.⁵⁰

Relationship Termination

The United States terminated its relationship with the resistance as it could no longer effectively accomplish U.S. objectives, and the growing rapprochement with China necessitated political concessions that eschewed support to the insurgency. According to Gyalo Thondup, China conditioned the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States on severing its connections and assistance to Tibet, including Mustang. Roger McCarthy, the CIA officer who created the Tibetan Task Force and who trained the first pilot team on Saipan, stated, "it still smarts that we pulled out in the manner we did... Granted, in many other operations, we did it even less gracefully and more abruptly."⁵¹

Gyalo Thondup delegated the execution of the CIA's withdrawal plan to his longtime companion Lhamo Tsering who initiated various programs to ease the Mustang guerrillas into new vocations. He devised a plan with the Combined Operations Center that resettled 500 of the Mustang force per year for three years, leaving 300 fighters to serve as a token resistance. One-hundred-twenty eventually joined the Special Frontier Force, but a number decided to carry on the resistance until they were defeated

and the Nepalese killed their leader. Lhamo started literacy programs and farming projects and developed projects in Nepal to employ former resistance members in carpet-weaving factories, hotel management, and transportation businesses, all of which succeeded, especially the carpet-weaving factory that is now one of Nepal's principle employers.⁵² In the words of John Kenneth Knaus, the CIA officer in charge of the covert operation, the Tibetans became the "worthy but hapless orphans of the Cold War."⁵³

Goal Accomplishment

U.S. sponsorship of the Tibetan proxy failed to achieve an independent Tibet, but ST CIRCUS achieved moderate success in accomplishing the limited objective of disrupting Chinese regional plans and also shaping the political discussion concerning Tibetan freedom that continues to this day. Guerrilla operations targeting Chinese military camps and disrupting major highway supply routes forced China to tie up one division in the area and divert traffic from western Tibet to 300 kilometers to the north. Pilot team members facilitated the Dalai Lama's escape to India, and guerrillas captured 1,600 classified Chinese documents that provided an intelligence windfall concerning Chinese internal assessments of the Great Leap forward, Chinese order of battle information, and internal political analysis discussing China's relations with Taiwan and the Soviet Union.

Blowback

Support to the Tibetan resistance did not produce classical blowback in the form of political embarrassment or turning its weapons and training on the United States. However, this proxy engagement exhibited both *adverse selection* and *agency slack*. The inability to select the optimal proxy and the failure to make it perform as intended often allowed the Tibetans to act contrary to the interests of the United States in pursuit of their own goals.

Adverse selection concerns choosing an appropriate proxy in a situation where the sponsor does not have a clear understanding of the proxy's capabilities or intent.⁵⁴ U.S. sponsorship of the Tibetan resistance suffered from selection of a group whose goals were not completely in sync with its own, and who lacked the capacity to completely fulfill its needs. The goal of the resistance was complete Tibetan independence from China, while the United States was primarily concerned with disrupting China in the greater scheme of global Communist containment.

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The CIA had to rely on specific personalities such as Gyalo Thondup and Gompo Tashi for proxy recruitment and operational management inside Tibet. While the Khampa refugees provided a convenient recruitment pool, the overwhelming Khampa composition prevented the resistance from becoming a truly national movement and relegated it to only the eastern region of Tibet where it could draw support from the local population. Furthermore, the CIA generally misunderstood the importance of regional allegiances and identities within the Tibetan community. U.S. intelligence based its analysis on British sources that focused mainly on the capital region of Lhasa, and only one of the CIA officers could speak Tibetan. Gyalo Thondup, the CIA's primary contact with the Tibetans, was from the northeastern region of Amdo and not always sympathetic to the Khampa authority systems. This adversely impacted the CIA's ability to advise the resistance, as demonstrated in the CIA veto of Tibetan suggestions to organize operations around alliances based on districts of origin, their attempt to impose merit-based, military-

style ranking on the Tibetans' social-power based system, and their efforts to organize battalions according to a place-neutral scheme which clashed with the district-based loyalties of the fighters.⁵⁵

U.S. support to the Tibetan resistance provides a number of valuable lessons to consider for future proxy engagement.

Agency slack occurs when the proxy pursues its own ends contrary to the interests of the sponsor.⁵⁶ Lack of embedded CIA advisors on the ground caused this to manifest in three ways that significantly impacted the operation. The first concerned the pilot teams' inability to organize the resistance elements into dispersed units. Their concentration and conventional head-on engagements with the superior People's Liberation Army caused heavy casualties that quickly degraded the resistance. Despite emphasis on guerrilla warfare and creating underground resistance cells in the villages, the teams were unable to break the Khampa and Amdoan tradition of using large tribal forces of a hundred or more fighters.⁵⁷

Second, the Mustang operation became a static base instead of the initial consolidation point to establish forward guerrilla elements for permanent operations in Tibet. Again, lack of direct supervision allowed leadership schisms to occur at Mustang that prevented execution of the original plan. Conditioning aerial resupply on resistance performance failed to achieve the requisite control. The base commander was even able to line his pockets with the money and material provided by the CIA without accountability.⁵⁸

Finally, U.S. partnership with India as an intermediate regional proxy, and subsequent lack of direct operational engagement with the Special Frontier Force, allowed India to siphon

off a substantial number of Tibetans for use in operations unrelated to the resistance. Diversion of these personnel and resources significantly degraded the CIA's ability to influence operations inside of Tibet and have a greater disruptive effect against China.

Lessons for Future Proxy Engagement

U.S. support to the Tibetan resistance provides a number of valuable lessons to consider for future proxy engagement. These apply throughout an entire generic proxy life cycle regardless of the specific temporal and political circumstances. It may be helpful to consider the process of developing and using a proxy as comparable to a value chain, the set of activities a firm performs to deliver a product or service to the market. This is a system that optimizes inputs, transformation processes, and outputs to eliminate waste and maximize performance.⁵⁹ Value is added to the product at each step in the chain. In proxy warfare, "value added" occurs by optimizing proxy capabilities and establishing mechanisms that both ensure proper selection and mitigate deviation from sponsor goals. A sponsor accomplishes this through the steps of recruitment, vetting, force generation, employment, and demobilization/integration.

Recruitment

The nature of the recruitment pool impacts proxy effectiveness. Recruiting from a restricted candidate pool may prohibit a mass-based, inclusive resistance movement, but it could increase effectiveness and sponsor control. Expanding the recruitment base may create a more inclusive movement, but it may create messy peripheral effects requiring the sponsor to balance the multiple competing interests of proxy diversification.

The CIA failed to develop an inclusive, broad-based movement in Tibet—it recruited

from refugee camps in India and relied on two key Tibetan individuals for selection. This provided a narrow situational perspective and favored one ethnic group that prevented formation of a national resistance movement. However, it afforded significant control over the proxy elements created for limited objectives such as intelligence collection and subversion.

Vetting

The amount of vetting required is proportional to the degree of ideological overlap between the sponsor and proxy. Corollary: reliance on individual proxy personalities for “mass vetting” may create significant control problems for a sponsor. Concern over the potential for a proxy to commit human rights abuses, associate itself with designated terrorist or criminal groups, or conduct insider attacks necessitates increased vetting for democratic sponsors. Using pre-vetted proxy leaders to mass vet individuals under their command may accelerate the force generation process, but it reduces the sponsor’s ability to screen out undesirable candidates and may adversely affect choosing the right proxy and controlling its actions.

Ideological alignment and close personal relationships with two key Tibetan resistance figures eliminated the need for the CIA to conduct significant vetting. Alignment persisted throughout much of the proxy engagement, but leadership schisms at the Mustang base prevented the effective employment of guerrilla elements against the Chinese after one of the CIA’s key partners passed away.

Force Generation

The relationship between the type of proxy force and the scope of the sponsor’s objectives must be realistically assessed at the beginning of the engagement and consistently re-evaluated. A sponsor’s need for its proxy to accomplish maximalist objectives during the early stages of

engagement may clash with both its willingness to devote the material and political capital required to secure those objectives, and the actual capabilities of the proxy force. Neglecting to align these elements at any point during the proxy engagement may reduce effectiveness and ultimately result in failure.

The CIA created and supported scalable proxy forces based on different objectives. Small “pilot teams” were successfully used to assess the capabilities of the existing resistance movements inside Tibet, collect intelligence, conduct sabotage, and later serve as force multiplication elements by advising the Tibetan guerrilla units in place of actual CIA officers on the ground. The CIA later supported the mass organization of traditional guerrilla elements by reconsolidating fighters dispersed and degraded by Chinese military operations. This proved ineffective as the Tibetans were unwilling to maneuver on Chinese forces, forcing the United States to terminate the relationship.

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Employment

Lack of embedded advisors reduces control over the proxy. A sponsor’s direct advisory presence on the ground signals commitment to the proxy engagement and affords increased opportunity to affect favorable outcomes, but it increases the risk of sponsor exposure.

Reduced control resulted in losses of effectiveness against China. Inability to influence tactical engagements ultimately degraded resistance operations. The Tibetans failed to disperse against the People’s Liberation Army and instead opted to fight in conventional, head-on engagements that resulted in heavy casualties. Operationally, guerrilla leadership

decided to remain in static bases in Nepal instead of establishing forward elements for permanent operations in Tibet. The United States was unable to apply sufficient leverage via resource provision/denial to force the resistance to comply with its directives.

Using intermediaries reduces sponsor control. A sponsor's attempt to further distance itself from the conflict and/or spread cost burdens by working through intermediaries will reduce its control over the proxy in proportion to the divergence between their operational objectives. Intermediate proxies often have different goals than the primary sponsor. This imposes significant constraints on a sponsor's ability to optimize proxy effectiveness.

Tibet illustrated an orderly withdrawal of sponsor support as the United States both demobilized and reintegrated its proxy forces.

CIA partnership with India's Intelligence Bureau resulted in over 12,000 Tibetans siphoned off from the resistance for service in India's Special Frontier Force. The CIA was unable to use them in Tibet against the People's Liberation Army, and India employed them in an operation against Pakistan to facilitate Bangladesh's independence.

Sponsor control based on resource provision is proportional to the value a proxy places on material support. Making resources contingent on battlefield effectiveness, equipment accountability, and human rights compliance is not a reliable mechanism to ensure proxy obedience if other cost/benefit calculations dominate the proxy's decision-making process.

The CIA attempted to use supply as a control measure by manipulating air drops to the guerrillas. Air drops were conditioned on the guerrillas moving off of their bases into forward

positions, but the Tibetans refused to depart unless they received the supplies first. This failed to achieve the intended effect and ultimately led to the guerrillas remaining in static positions until the CIA terminated the relationship.

Demobilization/Integration

The degree of planning for proxy demobilization/integration influences the post-conflict outcome. A proxy may be integrated into the post-conflict political order to establish enduring influence and leverage (as Iran did with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria), or demobilized to prevent potential blowback.⁶⁰ This must be a deliberate consideration and not an afterthought.

Tibet illustrated an orderly withdrawal of sponsor support as the United States both demobilized and reintegrated its proxy forces. The CIA, in conjunction with trusted Tibetan officials, executed a deliberate plan that resettled 500 guerrillas into civilian life per year for three years. A small number of guerrillas continued the resistance and were ultimately defeated, and some joined other security forces such as India's Special Frontier Force. The plan incorporated literacy programs and farming projects, and developed ventures in Nepal to employ former resistance members in carpet-weaving factories, hotel management, and transportation businesses

External political considerations directly impact both the strategic and tactical aspects of proxy employment. Divorcing the larger political and strategic considerations that prompted the initial proxy engagement from actual proxy employment on the ground may significantly reduce its effectiveness. Proxy warfare requires an integrated policy approach.

U.S. ideological commitment to containing Communism and the resistance's practical utility as a disruptive mechanism kept U.S. interest in Tibet relatively static until President Nixon's rapprochement with China in 1972. In light of this political shift, support to the Tibetan resistance undermined efforts to establish China

as a counterbalance to the Soviet threat and was subsequently phased out completely in 1974. In addition, domestic U.S. political constraints significantly decreased the resistance's operational effectiveness. Overflights were prohibited after the downing of a U-2 spy plane in Soviet airspace in 1960. Coupled with the potential for political fallout inherent in covert operations during the 1960 presidential elections, the CIA suspended resupply to the guerrillas for almost a year.

Conclusion

Proxy warfare in Tibet, despite significant indigenous personnel losses and failure to achieve the resistance's maximalist objective of an independent Tibet, accomplished the United States' limited objective of disrupting the Chinese occupation as part of the global effort to limit Communist expansion during the Cold War. This case provides one overarching lesson for future proxy employment by the United States: a sponsor may achieve *limited objectives* with only a small investment in a proxy force. However, a *democratic* sponsor must be willing to shoulder any resultant political fallout and explain the perception of "failure" to its constituency when the demand for maximalist objectives such as defeating or overthrowing an adversary is not satisfied by minimal resource expenditure.

By nature, strategic irregular warfare options employed *overtly* by a democratic sponsor in an era of increasing transparency can only be as effective as the political capital invested in their preparation and execution.⁶¹ Avoiding integrated policy approaches in an effort to achieve quick fixes to national security dilemmas may result in embarrassment and diminished global influence. Proxy warfare should remain a tool in the U.S. national security arsenal, but it must not serve as a substitute for a comprehensive foreign policy approach. These lessons from U.S. support to the Tibetan resistance should inform future U.S. policy considerations when outsourcing national security objectives to proxies as part of an indirect approach to compete below the level of armed conflict or avoid prohibitive military intervention. **IAJ**

NOTES

1 Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 100.

2 Irregular warfare is a key element of great power competition, and adversaries are exploiting unconventional methodologies such as the use of proxies to advance their interests without crossing the threshold to traditional armed conflict. The United States possesses similar capabilities through its special operations forces (SOF) and intelligence services to shape adversary behavior, both through behavior reinforcement—*unconventional deterrence*, and behavior modification—*unconventional compellence*. See Keith Pritchard, Roy Kempf, and Steve Ferenzi, "How to Win an Asymmetric War in the Era of Special Forces," *The National Interest*, October 12, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-win-asymmetric-war-era-special-forces-87601>; U.S. Army Special Operations Command, "Army Special Operations Forces Strategy," https://www.soc.mil/AssortedPages/ARSOFF_Strategy.pdf; Claire Graja, "SOF and the Future of Global Competition," *CNA* (May 2019), https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DCP-2019-U-020033-Final.pdf.

3 For how this case study applies to ongoing U.S. support to various Syrian resistance forces against the Islamic State, see: Steve Ferenzi, "Want to Build a Better Proxy in Syria? Lessons from Tibet," *War on the Rocks*, August 17, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/want-to-build-a-better-proxy-in-syria-lessons-from-tibet>.

- 4 These are components of Principal-Agent Theory known as “adverse selection” and “agency slack.” David A. Patten, “Taking advantage of insurgencies: effective policies of state-sponsorship,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 5 (2013): 880.
- 5 “Memorandum for the 303 Committee, 26 January 1968,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Volume XXX, China, Document 342 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1998), 739, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v30/d342>.
- 6 Peter Hopkirk, *Trespassers on the Roof of the World: The Secret Exploration of Tibet* (New York: Kodansha America, Inc., 1995), 5.
- 7 Kenneth Conboy and James Morrison, *The CIA’s Secret War in Tibet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 2, 9.
- 8 Ibid., 8.
- 9 Carole McGranahan, “Tibet’s Cold War: The CIA and the Chushi Gangdrug Resistance, 1956-1974,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 3 (2006): 109-111.
- 10 John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival* (New York: PublicAffair, 1999), 136, 138.
- 11 Ibid., 138.
- 12 McGranahan, “Tibet’s Cold War,” 109.
- 13 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 4-18.
- 14 Ibid., 137.
- 15 NSC 5429/5 stated: “We should be ready to exploit any opportunities which might occur as a result of inherent internal weaknesses of Communist China,” and “Utilize all feasible overt and covert means, consistent with a policy of not being provocative of war, to create discontent and internal divisions within each of the Communist-dominated areas of the Far East.” Colonel Edwin F. Black, Memorandum: “April 1 OCB (Operations Coordinating Board) Luncheon Discussion: Exploitation of Tibetan Revolt,” March 31, 1959, <http://www.chushigangdruk.ca/History%20docs/White%20house%20documents%20on-tibetan-revolt-various-1959.pdf>.
- 16 “Memorandum for the 303 Committee,” 739.
- 17 Mikel Dunham, *Buddha’s Warriors: The Story of the CIA-Backed Tibetan Freedom Fighters, the Chinese Invasion, and the Ultimate Fall of Tibet* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), 382.
- 18 Conboy and Morrison, *The CIA’s Secret War in Tibet*, 27, 32, 34.
- 19 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 169.
- 20 For more on deeper U.S.-Indian relations, India’s “Forward Policy” of challenging China’s territorial claims, and the influence of the Sino-Indian War on JFK’s administration, see Bruce Riedel, *JFK’s Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and the Sino-Indian War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2015).
- 21 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 266.
- 22 Ibid., 276.

- 23 Conboy and Morrison, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*, 228-229.
- 24 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 126.
- 25 Mao's Cultural Revolution sought to obliterate the "Four Olds:" Old Ideas, Old Culture, Old Traditions, and Old Customs. In addition to banning all aspects of Tibetan culture, by the end of the Cultural Revolution, only fifteen of the original 6,000 plus Tibetan monasteries remained. Tens of thousands of Tibetans were imprisoned on political grounds, and 1.2 million Tibetans died at the hands of the Chinese. Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 371-372.
- 26 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 312-313.
- 27 "Letter from Andruk Gompo Tashi to President Eisenhower, December 1959," 9. <http://www.chushigangdruk.ca/History%20docs/Letter%20from%20Andruk%20Gompo%20Tashi%20to%20President%20Eisenhower,%20December%201959.pdf>.
- 28 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 294, 310.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 55-74.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 84-139.
- 31 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 233.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 281.
- 33 CPI Inflation Calculator, <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=585%2C000&year1=196401&year2=201908>.
- 34 "Memorandum for the Special Group, 9 January 1964," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume XXX, China, Document 337 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1998), 732. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v30/d337>.
- 35 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 142.
- 36 Conboy and Morrison, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*, 72, 78.
- 37 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 238-239.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 241-249.
- 39 Dunham, *Buddha's Warriors*, 353.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 292-294.
- 41 "Memorandum for the Special Group," 732.
- 42 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 296-300.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 272.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 276.
- 45 Conboy and Morrison, *The CIA's Secret War in Tibet*, 242-246, 258.
- 46 "Memorandum for the 303 Committee, 26 January 1968," 741.

- 47 The Tibetan students participated in a year-long academic program combining anthropology, world history, politics, governmental organization, and English composition. Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 284-285.
- 48 “Memorandum for the Special Group, 9 January 1964,” 732.
- 49 “Memorandum for the 303 Committee, 26 January 1968,” 741.
- 50 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 287.
- 51 Dunham, *Buddha’s Warriors*, 382-383.
- 52 Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War*, 298-302.
- 53 Ibid., 324.
- 54 Patten, “Taking advantage of insurgencies: effective policies of state-sponsorship,” 880.
- 55 McGranahan, “Tibet’s Cold War,” 114-115.
- 56 Patten, “Taking advantage of insurgencies: effective policies of state-sponsorship,” 880.
- 57 Dunham, *Buddha’s Warriors*, 218, 242.
- 58 Ibid., 374-375.
- 59 Michael E. Porter, *Competitive Advantage* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 11-15.
- 60 Steve Ferenzi, “Beyond Half-Measures: Influencing Syria’s Political Order through Non-State Proxies,” *Small Wars Journal*, May 23, 2016, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/beyond-half-measures-influencing-syria%E2%80%99s-political-order-through-non-state-proxies>.
- 61 Steve Ferenzi, “Imposing Costs by Other Means: Strategic Irregular Warfare Options to Counter Russian Aggression,” *Small Wars Journal*, May 18, 2016, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/imposing-costs-by-other-means-strategic-irregular-warfare-options-to-counter-russian-aggres>.