

WikiLeaks cables: Dalai Lama called for focus on climate, not politics, in Tibet

Exiled Buddhist leader told US ambassador to India that 'political agenda should be sidelined' in favour of climate issues

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The Dalai Lama told US diplomats last year that the international community should focus on climate change rather than politics in Tibet because environmental problems were more urgent, secret American cables reveal.

The exiled Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader told Timothy Roemer, the US ambassador to India, that the "political agenda should be sidelined for five to 10 years and the international community should shift its focus to climate change on the Tibetan plateau" during a meeting in Delhi last August.

"Melting glaciers, deforestation and increasingly polluted water from mining projects were problems that 'cannot wait', but the Tibetans could wait five to 10 years for a political solution," he was reported as saying.

Though the Dalai Lama has frequently raised environmental issues, he has never publicly suggested that political questions take second place, nor spoken of any timescale with such precision.

Roemer speculated, in his cable to Washington reporting the meeting, that "the Dalai Lama's message may signal a broader shift in strategy to reframe the Tibet issue as an environmental concern".

In their meeting, the ambassador reported, the Dalai Lama criticised China's energy policy, saying dam construction in Tibet had displaced thousands of people and left temples and monasteries underwater.

He recommended that the Chinese authorities compensate Tibetans for disrupting their nomadic lifestyle with vocational training, such as weaving, and said there were "three poles" in danger of melting - the north pole, the south pole, and "the glaciers at the pole of Tibet".

The cables also reveal the desperate appeals made by the Dalai Lama for intervention by the US during unrest in Tibet during spring 2008.

As a heavy crackdown followed demonstrations and rioting, he pleaded with US officials to take action that would "make an impact" in Beijing.

At the end of one 30-minute meeting, a cable reports that the Dalai Lama embraced the embassy's officials and "made a final plea".

"Tibet is a dying nation. We need America's help," he was reported as saying.

Other cables reveal US fears that the influence of the 75-year-old Dalai Lama over the Tibetan community in exile might be waning or that a succession to his leadership could pose problems.

In June 2008, officials reported that their visit to six Tibetan refugee settlements across north and north-eastern India "underscores concerns that frustrated and dissatisfied Tibetan youth ... could pose serious problems".

"A widening generational divide finds Tibetan leaders unable to resolve growing dissatisfaction among younger Tibetans," the officials said.

In February, following the ninth round of talks in Beijing between the Tibetan government in exile, known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), and Chinese officials, US diplomats predicted that "the Chinese government's international credibility on human rights will continue to decline as Tibetans gain further access to media tools".

In a section of the cable entitled "A militant Shangri-La?", a reference to the fictional mythical Himalayan kingdom, the officials explained: "Their frustration's effect on the Tibetan movement could be exacerbated by the passage of time, as the Dalai Lama's increasing age inevitably slows down his gruelling travel schedule and his potential ability to continue to capture the world's attention on his people's plight."

A final point, made repeatedly by officials, is that the Indian government's policy towards the Tibetans in exile is likely to be decided by public sentiment.

In one confidential cable of March 2008, an official told Washington that Shiv Shankar Menon, the current Indian national security adviser and then India's top diplomat, had explained to the US ambassador that though "the Tibetan movement has the sympathy of the Indian public, and India has been a generally supportive home to tens of thousands of Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama, for nearly 50 years ... the tacit agreement that Tibetans are welcome in India as long as they don't cause problems is being challenged at a time when India's complex relationship with Beijing is churning with border issues, rivalry for regional influence, a growing economic interdependence, the nascent stages of joint military exercises, and numerous other priorities".

The US officials concluded that "while the [government of India] will never admit it", New Delhi's "balancing act with India's Tibetans [would] continue for the foreseeable future, with the caveat that a rise in violence - either by Tibetans here or by the Chinese security forces in Tibet - could quickly tip the balance in favour of the side with greater public support".

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