

Tibet has the right to its cultural identity and survival

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SOME nations have the calamity to vanish in a matter of weeks or months, overrun by the machinery of war; others die slowly, the victims of a thousand cuts of oppression. Tibet is one such nation to endure the latter fate. Its identity is being slowly and ruthlessly deleted by China.

Last week marked the 49th anniversary of a national uprising against Chinese rule, and yesterday marked the date on which Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, who led the uprising with support from the CIA, began his journey into exile, crossing into India a month later. The background to the uprising was the 1950 invasion of Tibet by 80,000 soldiers of the People's Liberation Army. (Troop numbers increased to more than 200,000 within four years.) The context was the Cold War. At the same time as the uprising the situation on the Korean Peninsula was moving towards war. The newly formed Communist government of Mao Zedong in China was supporting North Korea in its march south. The '50s also was the decade of Chairman Mao's "Great Leap Forward", which in its mass death toll and extermination of rural communities paralleled Stalin's worst crimes.

Although China, by a 17-point agreement in 1951, said it would respect Tibetan internal autonomy, the reality over the subsequent decades has been the reverse. Mass migration of Han Chinese to the region has changed the demographic dynamics, particularly in the bureaucracy and commerce of the region. The Tibetan government-in-exile in India has estimated that, in the 20 years from the uprising, 1.2 million Tibetans died, others were imprisoned. Tibetan culture was under siege.

This week the Dalai Lama labelled the Chinese actions in Tibet "whether intentionally or unintentionally some kind of cultural genocide" ... an "ancient nation with ancient cultural heritage is actually dying". As tensions rise to the surface, people are also dying on the streets of Lhasa. Beijing says that protesters have "either burned or hacked to death 13 innocent civilians". The government-in-exile says more than 100 protesters have died. China's response to the strife has been lamentably predictable and distressing. Send in the troops, shut down the area, block access to the world. Give the "troublemakers" a deadline to surrender to the state or face the "stern" consequences. The deadline for these malcontents was due to expire at midnight last night, Tibetan time. The pretence could then be fostered that stability had returned or was being restored. Bring on the Olympics.

It is here that the fundamental conflict arises. China is the emerging powerhouse economy of the world. Its meteoric rise to this position has had global ramifications, no less than in Australia.

China's thirst for raw materials has led to an exports boom in this country. Its growth is mind-boggling. According to Rio Tinto, China's economy accounted for 47% of all iron ore consumption, 32% of aluminium and 25% of copper.

This economic clout has no moral equivalence and therefore should not have any influence in examining China's human rights record. While Beijing embraces and flourishes in the capitalist system, it hangs onto the communist system of brutal suppression of its citizens who try to step out from the official line. Nearly 20 years ago it did so at Tiananmen Square, the space of "Heavenly Peace", when troops slaughtered 1000 pro-democracy supporters.

The image, which went around the world of the unarmed man standing alone in front of a tank, its gun

turret following his movements, crystallised the struggle between the authoritarian regime and civil liberties, freedoms that the West takes for granted.

Despite sporadic attempts at negotiations between Tibet and Beijing, 50 years after the uprising, China's answer to unrest still is to send in the army. This might have been the answer in the Cold War. It is not now.

The Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, can use his trip to Beijing in April, as part of a world tour, to illustrate how international pressure can be brought to bear at close quarters. Mr Rudd, who is scheduled to meet President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, yesterday labelled developments in Tibet as "disturbing" and called on China to "exercise restraint".

Given that Australia recognises China's sovereignty over Tibet, the protests can only go so far. Mr Rudd's former career as a diplomat in China may prove useful.

News reports from Beijing have quoted the views of the Chinese majority who defend the Government's actions against the protesters. They describe the Dalai Lama as a "master terror maker" who says he wants limited autonomy, but really wants Tibet to become

a free and independent state from "the motherland". In fact, what the Tibetans want is for their culture and identity to survive.

The Dalai Lama believes Tibetans are entitled to air their grievances in a peaceful manner, without fear of threat or intimidation. It is, on paper, a simple proposition. It is to China's shame that they cannot do so.

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