



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Jiang Zemin's tenure saw re-engaged talks but also hardening policies on Tibet

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Chinese leader Jiang Zemin, during whose tenure the most recent phase of the Tibetan-Chinese dialogue began, has passed away. In a terse announcement, Chinese state media said, “Jiang Zemin passed away due to leukemia and multiple organ failure in Shanghai at 12:13 p.m. on Nov. 30, 2022, at the age of 96.”

Jiang was brought in by Deng Xiaoping to take charge following the breakdown in the Chinese leadership on account of the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. He served as the Chinese Communist Party General Secretary from 1989 to 2002, as chairman of the Central Military Commission from 1989 to 2004, and as president of China from 1993 to 2003.

Following a break in the contact between Tibetan leadership and the Chinese government in the early 1990s, His Holiness the Dalai Lama entrusted his Special Envoy Lodi Gyari with the responsibility of being the lead interlocutor in working on re-engaging the Chinese government to resolve the Tibetan-Chinese conflict. As Lodi Gyari recalls in his recently published memoir “The Dalai Lama's Special Envoy: Memoirs of a Lifetime in Pursuit of a Reunited Tibet,” “then President Jiang's particular interest was a factor in the lead up to the dialogue process that took place between 2002 and 2010.” Gyari wrote, “By 1997, our strategy began to pay off. We established direct connections with President Jiang Zemin, and he began to take a personal interest in Tibet. He sent his trusted advisors to Lhasa [Tibet's capital] to get an unbiased picture of the situation and appointed Wang Jungfu, a senior official with Deputy Minister rank, to meet secretly with me and start a conversation.”

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who was in contact with Jiang since her past role as Mayor of San Francisco, also contributed in the reengagement. The contact also led to the inclusion of Tibet as an important agenda item for the summit between President Bill Clinton and Jiang in 1998, including a public discussion on Tibet between them. On June 27, 1998, in a joint press conference in Beijing, which was telecast live in China, Clinton said, “I urge President Jiang [Zemin] to assume a dialogue with the Dalai Lama in return for the recognition that Tibet is a part of China and recognition of the unique cultural and religious heritage of that region.” Clinton also said, “I have spent time with the Dalai Lama, I believe him to be an honest man, and I believe if he had a conversation with President Jiang, they would like each other very much.” In response, President Jiang Zemin said, “As long as the Dalai Lama makes a public commitment that Tibet is an inalienable part of China and Taiwan is a province of China, then the door to dialogue and negotiation is open ... Actually, we are having several channels of communications with the Dalai Lama, so I hope the Dalai Lama will make a positive response in this regard.”

On Nov. 10, 1998, the Dalai Lama issued a statement responding to Jiang saying, “I have expressed my commitment to the process of dialogue as a means to resolve the Tibetan problem. Therefore, when President Jiang sought public clarifications from me on certain issues during his press conference with President Clinton in Beijing [in June this year], I did not have any hesitation in welcoming his statement and making clear my readiness to respond. However, I do not wish to make a unilateral statement without the opportunity of prior informal consultations with the Chinese leadership. I believe such an informal consultation needs to take place in order to forestall misunderstanding and to receive a positive response from the Chinese leadership.”

This outreach to Jiang took place during a time in his tenure when the Chinese government was hardening its policies on Tibet, as reflected in the outcome of the “Third Forum on Work in Tibet” held in Beijing from July 20 to 23, 1994. There was also the disagreement on the issue of the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama, who passed away in 1989 and whose reincarnation was recognized by the Dalai Lama in 1995. However, the government under Jiang detained the then six-year old boy reincarnate and in his stead selected their own boy as the Panchen Lama in November 1995. In December 1995, the Dalai Lama issued a public statement stating that his recognition of the Panchen Lama’s reincarnation could not be changed. The Dalai Lama said: “On several occasions in the past years I have approached the Chinese Government in this matter without success. Last month again I appealed directly to the Chinese President Jiang Zemin to extend his government’s recognition to the young Panchen Lama. I had hoped that a personal appeal from my side might facilitate a gesture of goodwill from the Chinese Government. ... It is unfortunate that the Chinese Government has chosen to politicise this issue and to appoint a rival Panchen Lama.”

In his annual statement on the anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising on March 10, 2001, the Dalai Lama said, “Last July, my elder brother, Gyalo Thondup, once more made a personal visit to Beijing and brought back a message from the United Front Work Department reiterating the well-known position of the leadership in Beijing on relations with me. In September of the same year we communicated through the Chinese embassy in New Delhi our wish to send a delegation to Beijing to deliver a detailed memorandum outlining my thinking on the issue of Tibet and to explain and discuss the points raised in the memorandum. I sincerely hoped that this development would lead to an opening for a realistic approach to the Tibetan issue. I reasoned with the Chinese leadership that through face-to-face meetings we would succeed in clarifying misunderstandings and overcoming distrust. I expressed the strong belief that once this is achieved then a mutually acceptable solution of the problem can be found without much difficulty.”

In September 2002, a four-member delegation led by Special Envoy Lodi Gyari went to China for talks. The last round was held in 2010. In November 2002, Jiang handed over the Party leadership to Hu Jintao.

The Chinese authorities have announced a “funeral committee” with Xi Jinping as its chairman. It has three Tibetan members, Phakpalha Gelek Namgyal, Ragdi, and Jampa Phuntsok in the committee.



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